

PRIDE OF THE *Americans*

Curt Styres, a **Mohawk** and self-made **millionaire** from Six Nations of the Grand River Reserve in Canada; brings a **new** attitude as **majority owner** of Rochester's **hockey** and indoor **lacrosse** teams



Curt Styres, an outdoorsman, put a sky scene on the ceiling of his Grand River Enterprises office.

STORY BY **KEVIN OKLOBZIJA** STAFF WRITER | PHOTOS BY **JAMIE GERMANO** STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

OHSWEKEN, Ontario — The rewards of hard work and inspiration surround Curt Styres in splendid grandeur every day he climbs out of bed.

The nine-bedroom stone house, all 21,000 square feet of immaculate living space, has everything for the new owner of the Rochester Americans and Knight-hawks.

A theater with 10 reclining leather chairs. A library. A workout room. A granite-floored drawing room. A study room for his

kids. A TV room for his kids.

There's an indoor patio overlooking the outdoor pool. A pool that, if drained, is larger than the entire house in which Styres spent 2½ years of his childhood.

Styres, a self-made millionaire of Mohawk heritage, is thriving in the heart of Six Nations of the Grand River Reserve. He was one of 10 founding partners in Grand River Enterprises, a cigarette manufacturer located on the reserve, which is near Hamilton, Ontario.

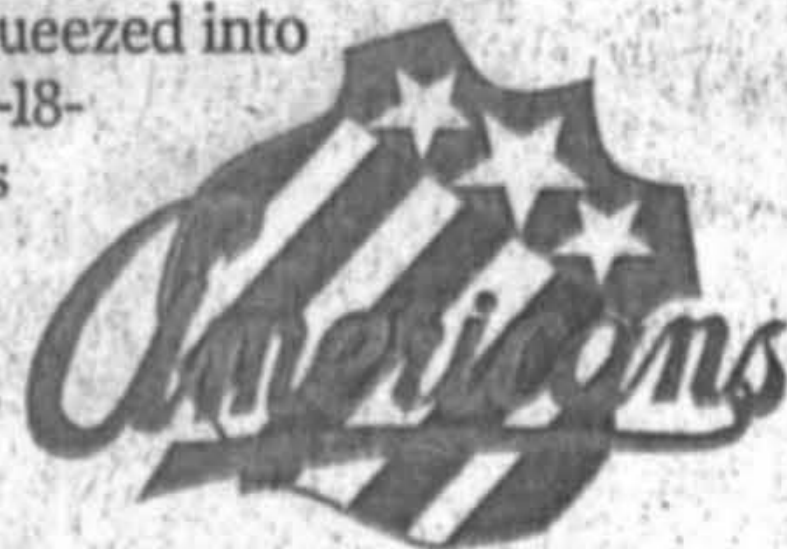
He takes great pride in having become the first Native American to purchase majority ownership of

top-level professional sports teams in the United States or Canada.

But he hasn't forgotten the pain of seeing his mother, Vera, as she raised five children.

As a child, he squeezed into that old, 12-foot-by-18-foot house with his two sisters, two brothers and his mother. There was no basement, no indoor plumbing.

"There was just enough room," Styres recalls, "for a bunk bed to lay



Styres

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against the wall to the right and a bunk bed to lay against the wall to the left. There was an oil heater and a couch on the back wall; my mom slept on the couch."

The family wasn't there by choice. They were forced to move during the summer of 1964, less than a year after Curt's father, Carlton, was killed in a car accident.

"We had lived in a bigger house, but it was condemned," said the 49-year-old Styres. "This was small, but it was warm. The other house was cold. I can remember getting up in the morning and you had to break the ice in the sink so you could wash your face."

He's trying to make sure other kids on the reserve have better. He has poured millions back into causes to help his people by building a school and lacrosse arena on the reserve. The old school was condemned.

"Building the school is something I always wanted to do," he said. "I want to get the kids on the trend of helping someone that can't help themselves or protecting someone that can't protect themselves."

"Like my mom always says, 'It's not what you've got, it's how you spend it.' You could have everything in the world but if you don't share it with anybody, it's a pretty lonely day."

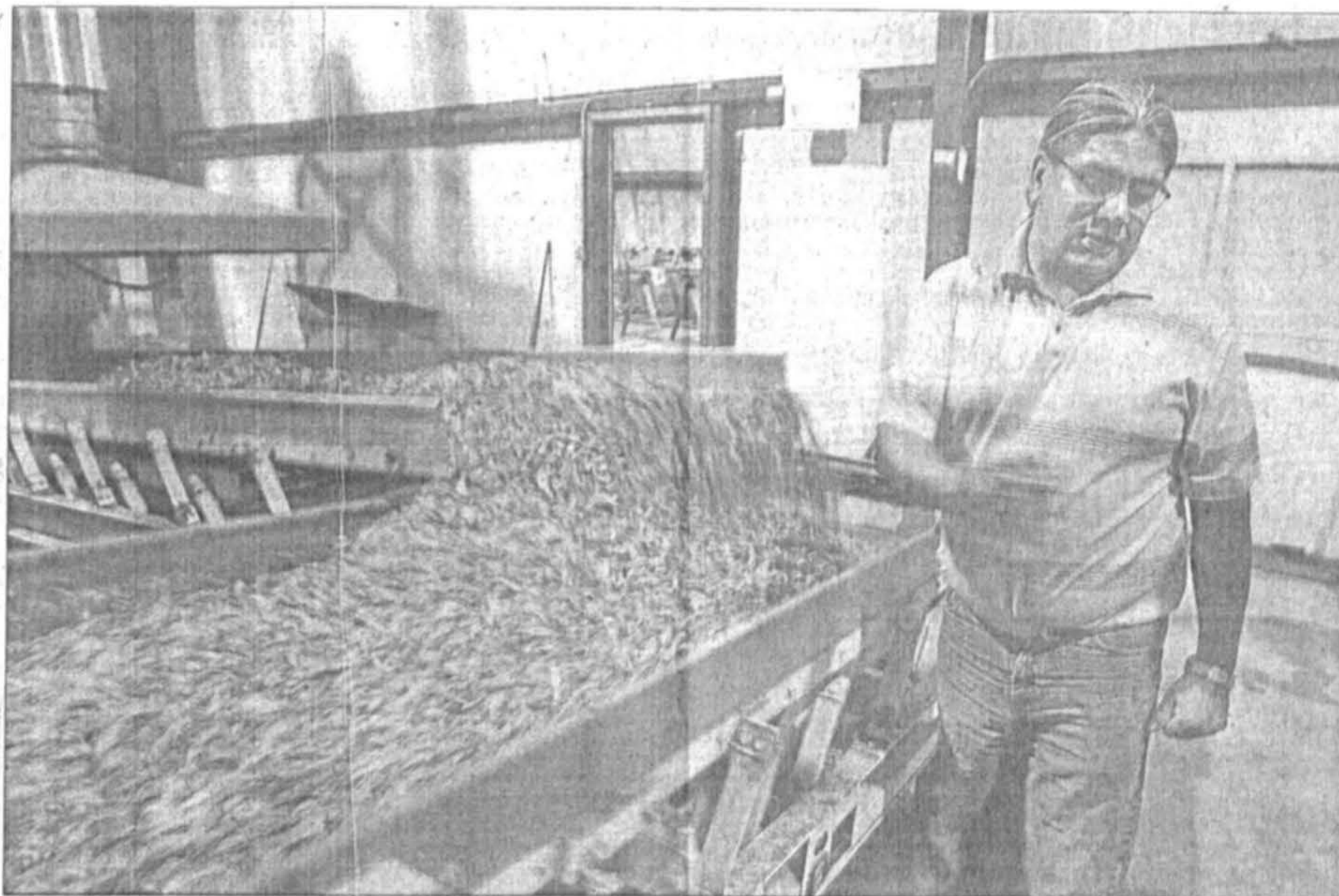
Now he has made it his mission to restore the pride of the Amerks and Knighthawks, and in the process make money on sports in Rochester.

He has hired seven new staff members, making his lifelong friend and current business associate, Lewis Staats, president of the operation. Styres makes the 2½-hour commute from his house to the rink at least twice a week; more once the Amerks' season begins on Oct. 10.

Facing financial ruin last season because of unpaid bills, angry creditors and squabbles within Steve Donner's ownership group, the Amerks and Knighthawks were scoffed at by fans and ridiculed by former corporate sponsors.

Styres says he is committed to the team's new slogan — A New Day For A Rochester Tradition — which is plastered around town on 28 billboards.

"I think the fans will be extremely pleased with what Curt Styres and his management



JAMIE GERMANO, staff photographer



JAMIE GERMANO, staff photographer

Curt Styres, above, the new owner of the Rochester Americans and Knighthawks, walks through the cigarette plant in Ohsweken, Ontario. The plant is one of three that make Seneca and Mohawk brands, which are sold in Canada and the U.S., including western New York.

and pay the bills. ... She'd say, 'I'll get what you need, you get what you want. And I'll decide what you need.'"

The kids never complained. Today, Styres' new home sits on what was once the farm of Vera's grandfather. He raised crops, vegetables and cows and chickens.

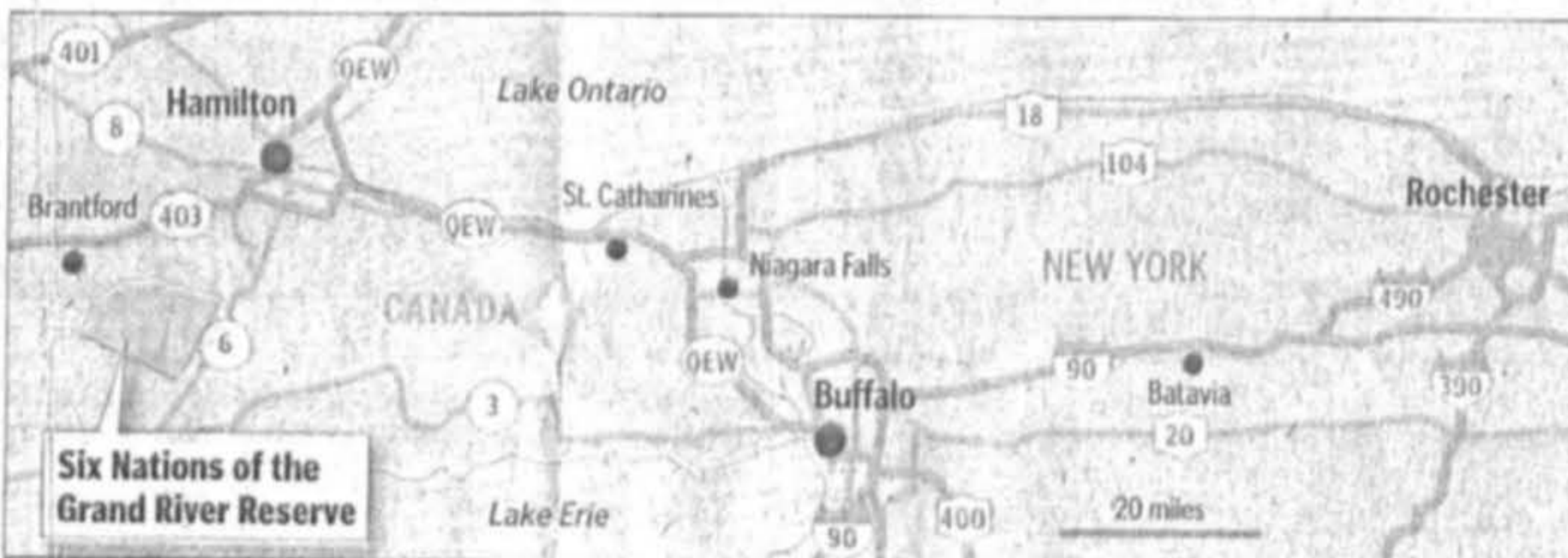
"And of course horses," she said. "We had to have horses to pull the plow."

Vera, 73, remembers sitting on her grandfather's shoulders as he walked down to the barn to milk the cows.

"After a while we only had to go part way," she said. "The lead cow must have liked me because I would call her name — So-

Across the border

Curt Styres, new majority owner of the Rochester Americans and Knighthawks, grew up on the Six Nations of the Grand River Reserve and still lives there today. From his home or office at Grand River Enterprises, he's a 2 1/2-hour drive from Blue Cross Arena at the Community War Memorial.



KEVIN M. SMITH, graphics editor



Curt Styres, his mother and four siblings lived for a time in a 12-foot-by-18-foot house, left. It would fit in the swimming pool of his current home on the Six Nations of the Grand River Reserve in southern Ontario, below.



Curt Styres

Age: 49.

Hometown: Ohsweken, Ontario, a town within Six Nations of the Grand River Reserve.

Family: 9 children — Crystal, 32; Ronilee, 25; Jocelyn, 20; Holly, 18; Tyler, 17;

Brandon, 15; Sohghwayadisa, 14; Bow, 8; and Hunter, 5. Curt is divorced.

Primary job: Oversees day-to-day operations of Grand River Enterprises, the third-largest cigarette manufacturer in Canada.

Latest venture: Majority ownership of the Rochester Americans and Knighthawks.

The color orange

Curt Styres will often be seen wearing orange or driving something orange.

There's a very touching reason for his orange passion.

Following the death of his father, his Uncle Frankie checked in on the family often.

"He always had the big cars with the loud motors and they were always orange," Styres said of Frankie Turkey. "From not having anything, he'd stop by, throw us into his car and take us to the track."

"I want to keep his colors alive."

His home's backyard pool accessories — from the picnic table to fake palm trees — are orange.

Orange is being incorporated into the Knighthawks color scheme.

Not everything works with orange, however. "You can't change the red, white and blue," Styres said of the Amerk colors.

Online Extra

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Click on this story to see an audio slide show on Curt Styres.

announce the sale was set for 2 p.m. June 19. At 1:15 p.m., Styres was ready to tear up the contract and drive back to Canada.

Styres said Donner was adamant about staying involved in day-to-day operations.

"Steve wanted a say and he wanted a job," Styres said. "I let Steve know that when I signed the paper, all the decisions would be made with the best interest of Arrow Express Sports, not Steve Donner."

Thus, Donner owns 40 percent of the franchises but Styres has the only vote that counts. Giving up his title as Amerks

said Mayor Robert Duffy, who had refused to do business with Donner any longer.

Duffy said he understood Styres even better after a news conference in June, when the franchise sales to Styres became official, Phil Fontaine, the National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, strolled into the atrium of Blue Cross Arena at the Community War Memorial.

Fontaine oversees more than 600 Aboriginal nations in Canada and said he was honored to show his support of Styres by coming to Rochester.

"That was like the president coming here," Duffy said.

Styres is the antithesis of royalty. He's humble and quiet. He'll wear a suit and tie only when absolutely necessary. For the most part, it's jeans and a golf shirt, preferably orange.

A doorman wouldn't be out of place at his home, but there's little need for even a doorbell.

"Only strangers knock," he said.

There are few strangers in Ohsweken. During summer months, his basement often becomes an impromptu dormitory for teenage members of his Junior A lacrosse team.

"There are 20 people here sometimes," said Styres, a divorced father of nine who has been with his girlfriend, Trish, for 15 years. His children range in age from 5 to 32. His two oldest daughters work at the cigarette factory. Two daughters are in college and his five sons are in school on the reserve.

No silver spoon

The contrast between Styres' life today and his childhood is stark.

Growing up, Styres watched his mom toil in the tobacco fields in the summer and as a house cleaner in the winter to make enough money each week to feed her family. All the while she saved to build a new house.

They moved into that new home in December 1966. She is still there.

"New clothes to me were clothes passed down from somewhere," said Styres, who along with nine original partners turned a coffee-shop idea of manufacturing cigarettes on the reserve into a set-for-life venture.

"My mother always had enough to put food on the table

come to us."

That's the closest anyone in this family came to taking the easy way out. And the farm chores were relatively easy compared to what was ahead for Vera.

While her husband worked construction on and off the reserve, she worked at the Westinghouse plant in Brantford, Ontario, but was forced to give up the job after Carlton's death in 1963.

"A welfare administrator came over to the house and said, 'This is what we'll do for you if you stay home with your kids,'" she said. "First of all, you wonder how will I feed them? Then, how they're going to turn out."

Vera Styres was intent on raising her children true to the traditional Native American teachings of the Seven Grandfathers: Love, respect, wisdom, humility, bravery, honesty and truth.

"You try to teach good manners, fair play, teamwork, hard work," she said.

Happy at home

Curt has the money to live anywhere but built on the reserve. He thinks he lives in paradise.

The reserve has no fast-food chains selling burgers or lattes. There is no big-box home improvement store. There are flame-brand gas stations — Styres and his brother own an Esso — but that's about it in terms of franchise fanfare.

"All we have here is fields and dogs," Styres said. "There are no Tim Hortons, no McDonalds."

And no place better on earth. "It seems like a lot of successful Natives go to the city and never come home," Styres said.

"This is where I live. Some people can move away and never look back. I can't. You ever see a dog chase a car? Once you catch it, what the hell do you do with it? That's kind of me when I go somewhere. OK, I've seen it, now what do I do? This is home."

The Six Nations of the Grand River Reserve is a tract comprising 71 square miles of land in southern Ontario, about a 30-minute drive southwest of Hamilton.

The population of about 11,000 is made up of people from the following nations: Cayuga,

Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Seneca and Tuscarora. The six form the Iroquois Confederacy.

"They came here in 1784 from Syracuse," Styres said. "I probably have a lot more relatives in Rochester than people who live in Rochester" do.

Always a sports fan

Curt played lacrosse and hockey as a kid. To this day, he and life-long buddy Delby Powless can recall minute by minute, goal by goal, their 17-16 loss in the President's Cup Junior B championship game in 1981.

"You don't forget too many things that happen in lacrosse,"

"I want to win championships by choice, not by chance. If I want chance, I'll go to the casino."

CURT STYRES,

new owner of two Rochester sports teams on his philosophy with his Junior A lacrosse team

said Powless, who oversees operations at Styres' Iroquois Lacrosse Arena.

Styres played his final lacrosse game for a senior team in 2003. Then he bought the Six Nations Arrows, the youth lacrosse team that competes in Ontario's Junior A lacrosse league, and Arrow Express Sports was formed.

"I get questioned all the time, 'What do you know about sports?' I tell them, 'Just wait and find out.'"

For one, he knows marketing. Arrow Express is his delivery firm. The corporate name is now part of the lacrosse logo.

He also knows how to win. The Arrows won the league championship his first four years as owner, from 2004 through 2007. The 2007 team even achieved the ultimate in success, winning the Minto Cup. The Arrows hadn't been Canadian champions since 1992.

There was a reason, too. Styres believed the team had become complacent and lazy. When he took over, he demanded an intense work ethic. He hired a personal trainer and nutritionist and expected his players to be at the arena after school.

"I just told them, this is what you have to do if you want to win," Styres said. "I want to win

championships by choice, not by chance. If I want chance, I'll go to the casino."

Smokes, anyone?

In 1993 he took a major gamble on tobacco. Styres was able to save money he made in a dozen years as an ironworker. He and nine partners invested in cigarette manufacturing.

Today Mohawk and Seneca brands are sold throughout Canada and on Native American land in parts of the United States, including New York and North and South Carolina.

Grand River Enterprises has three manufacturing plants: In

Ohsweken; on the Allegany Reservation in Cattaraugus County; and in Brandenburg, Germany.

The plant in Ohsweken employs 220 people. There are two work shifts and the machines run six days a week.

"We're barely keeping up," Styres said.

He appears to know everyone he employs, from the guy driving the forklift, the woman monitoring a packing machine or the analyst in quality control. He says their first name when he says hello and they say, "Hi, Curt" back.

He's the boss without an attitude.

Grand River Enterprises was not an overnight success, however.

"For probably the first 10 years we all had second jobs," Styres said. His other job was founding and operating Ohsweken race track with brother Glenn. The track, built in 1994, is home to sprint car and thunder stock racing.

Zooming around the dirt track was good therapy for slow cigarette sales.

The company also battled the Canadian and U.S. governments over excise taxes — and finally gave in. Styres and other company officials were charged with smuggling contraband in 1992

and 1995.

In 1996, Grand River Enterprises agreed to pay excise taxes. The company says it has since paid more than \$800 million in taxes in Canada and the U.S.

The American Hockey League, through its lawyer, spent weeks conducting background and financial checks of Styres before approving the sale of the Americans to him.

"They spent a fair amount of time and effort researching him and that was reassuring," said Rochester Corporation Counsel Tom Richards, who said the city did its own due diligence.

As a safety net, since no one knew Styres, the city required that all of the arena rent be paid up front. He complied with a \$180,000 check.

The hockey and lacrosse leagues also asked that he obtain letters of credit large enough to cover dues and basic operating expenses. He complied but in the form of cash; because he is a Canadian living on a reserve, finances are difficult to verify and banks wouldn't issue a letter of credit.

Rochester or bust

Owning the Junior A lacrosse team fueled Styres' interest in bigger ventures.

Two years ago, he inquired about the NHL's Toronto Rock. Then Regy Thorpe, coach of the Arrows and a former Knight-hawks star, introduced Styres to Donner, an owner and managing partner of the Amerks and Kighthawks.

"I was in talks to buy the Rock and I could have driven up and down the road," Styres said of the convenience of owning a team in Toronto. "But what made me choose Rochester was when they offered up the Americans."

"Everybody says if you're going to buy a team, that's the team to buy. We did our research. The Americans can be a profitable organization. The Kighthawks can break even."

The negotiations started in August 2007 and the deal became official in June — barely.

"I was ready to back out at the 11th hour," Styres said.

More like the very last minute. The news conference to

said these teams were his babies.

"I had pictured Curt and I high-fiving at the podium," Donner said. "But he told me (being involved in) the day-to-day operations, it wasn't allowed."

Had Styres refused to sign the sale papers, he'd still have been out considerable cash.

Styres' good-faith investments during negotiations paid operating expenses toward the end of the AHL and NHL seasons. It made no sense for the old partnership with Randall Latona and Walter Turek to dump more money into teams they were selling.

"We could have walked away from the deal and lost \$1 million because we were floating the teams," Styres said. "It would have been an expensive lesson."

There were plenty of warnings that he was buying damaged goods and inheriting too much debt. Everyone in Rochester that he met couldn't believe he was seriously considering the purchase, Duffy included.

"He pretty well wanted to know if I was on medication," Styres said of the mayor. "He wanted to know if I was running on all cylinders."

He's in the process of making his sports teams run smoothly. Styres spent the summer repairing the tarnished reputation of the teams, both within the corporate community and with sports fans.

He inherited an accounts payable folder containing more than \$1 million in bills and went about bringing balances to zero.

A few still pop up. When Julie Farmer, an employee at Grand River Enterprises, was booking the entire season of travel for the Amerks earlier this month, a hotel in Winnipeg, Manitoba, initially refused to give the team rooms. The Amerks still owed money from a visit in January. Styres sent a check.

"Lewis and I giggled about it," Styres said, of his operations manager. "We always have our fingers crossed that we have everything buttoned up."

He refuses to criticize the old management, however. "The team's here, the bills are paid. I'm not much of a gossiper. It's my team now. There's not much I can do about yesterday." □

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