



# Learning Walks

## Indigenous Peoples Task Force

**T**he Native Youth Project (NYP) was a national learning collaborative facilitated by the National Network of Public Health Institutes (NNPHI), Healthy Teen Network, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that engaged seven community-based organizations serving American Indian youth in efforts to reduce teen pregnancies. These seven community-based organizations—Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, Indigenous Peoples Task Force, Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, Center for Prevention & Wellness Salish Kootenai College, The Boys and Girls Club of the Northern Cheyenne Nation, Wind River Tribal Youth of Northern Arapaho Tribe, and First Nations Community HealthSource—worked with community leaders, including youth, to select, adapt, and implement an evidence-based teen pregnancy prevention program to address community priorities with cultural relevance. Additionally, these community-based organizations worked with the other funded agencies to share lessons learned and best practices. However, the project results only told a part

of the story and do not fully illuminate the processes grantees engaged in to make the Native Youth Project a reality in their specific communities.

To uncover and share the invisible work behind the concrete and measurable deliverables, Healthy Teen Network conducted Learning Walks with three agencies. Learning Walk is a popular strategy used in the education field by which an external observer visits a community to document lessons learned, provide input to guide decision-making for future project funding, and gain understanding of the impact that a particular project might have had in a community. The Learning Walks completed by Healthy Teen Network provided the opportunity to learn about the process of engaging stakeholders, the unique geographical context that shaped the implementation of the project, and the social impact the Native Youth Project has had in these three communities. This report from the field highlights lessons learned and successes from the initiative.

# Context

We started our learning walk at the Indigenous Peoples Task Force (IPTF) offices on a chilly April morning. IPTF is a two-story round wooden structure that resembles traditional homes in the Native community. IPTF sits in the heart of an American Indian urban community in a strip in South Minneapolis; Native families are primarily Ojibwe, Lakota or Dakota. They coexist with diverse population from Latin America and refugees from Africa and Asia. However, there are pockets of Native enclaves in this area, such as Little Earth, a HUD-subsidized housing complex that houses about 500 native youths under the age of 20. Not only do they live side by side with people from all walks of life, but Natives intermarry with many of them, particularly Latinos. Many Native households are comprised by one Native parent and a non-Native parent; hence their children are a mix of cultures who may identify as Native in some contexts, and as Latino, African American, or other, in different contexts.

A short drive away from IPTF office, we found a high concentration of stores, restaurants, public transportation (buses), and food markets. The neighborhood also has large buildings that serve as community and spiritual centers to the Native community.

Sitting around a small conference table in her office, Sharon Day, Ojibwe elder and

director of IPTF, told us about the origins of IPTF and her vision. Her relentless work in the field of substance abuse also led her to work with HIV/AIDS when more and more Natives began dying from the infection. What started as a housing facility and linkage to healing for HIV-positive patients bloomed into an organization with a solid health and

theater peer education methods and named the program Ikidowin (to speak). Through this process, IPTF stayed faithful to the Native traditions of the youth they serve and the partnerships they could leverage in the community to provide a more complete experience for the youth. Health programs not only honor the local native tradition, but also integrate

**“By using theater, youth tell their story, have a safe space to heal, get connected with their culture and origins, and have the opportunity to teach others.” -Sharon Day, Executive Director**

social justice mission. IPTF developed curricula and education materials on HIV/AIDS and currently conduct programs on smoking cessation. But these topics were just the beginning for a community that craves health and education programming. Youth became a natural focus of their work and started the peer-education prevention youth theater group, Ogitchidaag Gikinooamaagad (Medicine Warriors), a curriculum developed by Sharon Day that uses experiential education methods and Native traditional teachings, as well as theater as a powerful tool for both peer education and self-healing. After many successful years with the Ogitchidaag Curriculum, IPTF was awarded a Federally funded Office of Minority Health three year grant Curbing HIV/AIDS Transmission (CHAT) in 2009.

In 2012, through the Native Youth Project, IPTF adapted and implemented the evidence-informed program, Native STAND together with the Ogitchidaag

shared values from other Native cultures. Likewise, they integrate evidence-based programs and attempt to balance both concepts: evidence-based and Native culture. In designing programs for youth, Sharon and the program facilitators made numerous adaptations to address Native culture, but also to cross cultural lines. Their programs are well attended by youth from other cultures--Latino, Ethiopian, and others. They all share a common background of historical trauma and relocation. They also face similar problems as Native youth.

Their most recent play is called Wait, a teen pregnancy prevention play. The play was originally written by a pilot cohort of youth participants during the 2012/2013 school year, and directed by a local theater company Pangea World Theater. The youth performing the play right now were not the original writers, but still add their voices to the script with new additions, and work with Pangea Theater to receive theater coaching.





# The Youth

Later that day, we met the youth in the community room of a neighborhood church that also serves a community center. On this day, the youth met to prepare the props and share some thoughts before their performance later that day. One by one, we met the youth-- three girls and three boys, ages 14-16. They were quiet and shy at first, but gave us a warm welcome.

That afternoon, we attended one performance of *Wait* at a metro-wide Native youth summit. Shortly before lunch, the group changed into black Nike N7 t-shirts, got their props (including a baby doll) and a few chairs and performed in front of an audience of 15 adults and around 60 youth. After the play, they answered a few questions from the audience. After the performance we jumped into the van and went for lunch to the youth's favorite place, a local pizza parlor. We asked youth directly about their experience in the group. They all liked being in the group and have no plans of quitting.

Every year, IPTF open the admissions process to all youth, but the youth currently in the program have the option of staying in the group. Last year they received more than 40 applications, complete with a written description of each youth's motivation to join the program and his/her age. Each applicant has to go through a face-to-face interview. Each youth is hand-picked from the applicant pool very carefully by facilitators. Brenna, one of the program facilitators, explained that they craft a group comprised of individuals who are harmonious in their traits and personalities, but also complement one another. They say that this is key to be able to ensure a safe space and promote cohesiveness among the members. The group we met was significantly younger than the previous group. They were able to achieve such a level of synergy that none of them want to leave, and plan to continue next year as well. There is not a lack of interest. On the contrary, they get many more applicants than they have spots for. They would like to do much more to accommodate the youth that have the interest and the need to participate in similar programs.

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Over pizza and soda, youth told us how the monetary incentives IPTF give them is a big draw. Their participation is considered “work,” so when they are rehearsing the play or participating in *Ikidowin*, they are working and earning money. This money not only helps them to buy things they like, but also help their families. Although the incentives attract them to the program, the program itself makes them stay. According to them, they “get to travel,” “go places after the performance,” (like the pizza parlor we were in) and “meet new people.”

We posed one question to the group: What is one thing about you and your community that you would like to tell the world? Going around the table, each youth and facilitator had something to say:

- [Tell them about] all of our cultures.
- [Our] community is educated about our culture.
- [We have] great youth who are talented, smart and play sports.
- We all get along.
- Good people.
- Lots of people to have fun with.
- We have a community that supports each other.
- [We have] knowledge about culture. Not everyone is connected but they help each other out.

As Curtis Kirby, another project facilitator, explained, the power lies in the journey that the group goes through together in order to be able to stand in front of an audience and talk, act, move and answer impromptu questions by peers. When the youth met for the first time many of them did not talk, did not look you in the eyes. Looking at the youth around the table—either Facebooking, making jokes, teasing one another—it is hard to imagine them voiceless. But, according to Kirby, “they found their voice” in the group.

# Working with Stakeholders



“Health doesn’t occur in isolation... There is a strong belief that positive health outcomes will come by restoring the culture in the community.” -Sharon Day

On our second day of the learning walk, we visited Teen Age Medical Services (TAMS), a local full service medical clinic located in their local neighborhood of Phillips in South Minneapolis. IPTF partnered with TAMS to run one of the activities of the Ikidowin program that encourages youth to visit a family planning clinic and boosts their confidence to obtain services and become advocates of their own health.

From everyone we talked to—from the mother of one of the youth, the coordinator of Dream of Wild Health, the directors at Pangea World Theater, and the family planning counselor at TAMS—we received the same message: native youth crave for programming that goes beyond the specific medical aspect. Sharon explained that health doesn’t occur in isolation. In the traditional way, the sick person sits in a

circle with healers or doctors and other members of the community. All of them have a stake in the healing process. There is a strong belief that positive health outcomes will come by restoring the culture in the community. When you know your name, you know your purpose. In that sense, the Ikidowin has bound youth with a mission to educate their peers, but it has also allowed them to heal together and utilize their culture to reaffirm their voice in their community.

IPTF will continue to expand their facilities and programs. IPTF continue to use Ikidowin program even after the funding from NYP has concluded. They have been successful in integrating this initiative with some of the other projects that the organizations currently have. Sharon’s vision also transcends the boundaries of their round wooden structure. In her office lies the architectural model of the new IPTF facilities and community center which will include offices, as well as areas for healing, recreation, dining, and the arts. The new center will be surrounded by newly planted cedar trees and a community food garden.

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