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E.L.D.E.R.S. Gathering for
Native American Youth:
Continuing Native American Traditions
and Curbing Substance Abuse
in Native American Youth

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E.L.D.E.R.S. Gathering for Native American youth: continuing Native American traditions and curbing substance abuse in Native American youth describes the efforts of Native American Elders, traditionalists, and non-native volunteers interested in preserving the culture and traditions of the Haudenosaunee (People of the Longhouse), also known as the Iroquois. This event is held every summer at the Ganondagan Historical site located near Victor, in upstate New York. The purpose of this week long gathering is to bring together Native American youth who are interested in learning more about their traditional ways with Native American Elders who practice these traditions. Much of the program's efforts focus on developing the "good mind" of the youth participants so that the youth and Elders are more likely to refrain from substance abuse. Youth participants begin to learn how to incorporate traditional values and beliefs into their lives while also developing leadership skills for use when each returns to their home environment hence, the acronym E.L.D.E.R.S. (Encouraging Leaders Dedicated to Enriching Respect and Spirituality). Many participants make the annual visit from reservations and urban areas in the New York state area while some have come from as far away as California. In addition to describing this program, a literature review that highlights some of the issues facing Native American youth in contemporary society accompanies this report. Insight and suggestions for developing similar programs are presented as well.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to present the on-going efforts of several concerned individuals and community leaders who, with corporate connections and support from Native American businesses and volunteers, have taken the initiative to organize a week long camping event for Native American youth. This event is held annually at the Ganondagan Native American historical site in upstate New York near Victor, Ontario County. At issue is the acknowledgment that many indigenous youth are growing up having never been exposed to the beliefs of their ancestors and that coming into adolescence with increased experience and knowledge of their culture may help in the self identity process. This self identity process is thought to aid them as they make their way living in "two worlds"; the world of their heritage and the world of the dominant society. Originators of the camp believe that a lack of exposure to traditional beliefs and values as they face the challenges of growing up in two cultures might contribute significantly to the increase of substance use and abuse and that a decline in healthy living practices can also lead to such conditions as obesity related diabetes.

At it's inception, the camp was originally intended to serve as a support for Native American adolescents who are interested in learning and retaining more of their cultural heritage. The program for the camp is designed so that the youth are provided with ample opportunity to network with other Native youth who face similar issues and challenges of identity development in contemporary society. A serendipitous outcome is that while the initial program was intended to be one of cultural discovery, it has evolved into a program that increasingly addresses matters of substance abuse prevention in Native youth based on an increased understanding of the indigenous culture.

Participants learn some of the traditional practices and values of their ancestors from Haudenosaunee elders and from youth who are more culturally aware. As the program has evolved, the youth who attend this event annually report that they have made conscious efforts to refrain from substances and to modify their lifestyle. Recently, due to the increased level of diabetes within many Native American communities, dietary issues have been

addressed during recent camp initiatives while continuing the cultural learning and substance abuse prevention aspects.

Definitions

Haudenosaunee, also known as the Six Nations of the Iroquois, refers to the *People of the Longhouse* and describes a social group alliance that has historically revered the teaching and wisdom of its elders. The elders, those with experience in traditional practices of indigenous peoples, maintain the responsibility of carrying on the traditions and cultural values of the Six Nations members and their descendants. The organizers of this event are descendents of the Senecas, or Keepers of the Western Door of the Six Nations alliance. Therefore, much of the teaching and learning activities are rooted in this cultural framework.

Tradition will be defined as those practices and beliefs that are passed down from generation to generation, usually orally, from elders with extensive practice knowledge and experience in the Longhouse traditions. The traditional practices that tend to receive the greatest amount of attention are those associated with the retention of the native language. Recently, in many indigenous communities, there has been a rise in efforts to revitalize the traditional languages such as Seneca, the language spoken by many from western New York state. Much of the history, and the values that emanate from the history, is passed on orally from one generation to the next via the language. The language is also instrumental in the appropriate recitation of the Thanksgiving Address, the traditional way of giving thanks at the opening of a gathering, and numerous recognized prayers and spiritual offerings.

Seven Generations is the term used to describe the belief that the activities, accomplishments, and planning for the future needs to be cognizant with the needs and requirements of future generations seven generations hence. As such, great care is taken to preserve and retain cultural practices and to instill in the youth the importance of passing on this knowledge and wisdom to the next generation.

Culture will be defined as the shared set of beliefs and values that emanate from a groups practice of a shared language,

behaviors, customs, and knowledge and is derived from a common comprehension of reality, history, and future (Yutrzenka, Todd-Bazemore, Caraway, 1999).

Activities

During the camp those in attendance are provided with the insights needed in order to begin to develop an understanding of the basics of the Haudenosaunee belief system. This includes knowing the importance of the earth ecosystem, each persons role as caretaker of the "Earth Mother" and it's relevance to continued indigenous development. Recognizing and understanding of the importance of the Seneca language use to convey this knowledge is essential to this aspect of the program

For some who speak their language, they are able to present the Thanksgiving Address in the native language. The Thanksgiving Address is an expression of appreciation for, and reverence of, all things that have been provided to indigenous people by their creator. It should be noted that while Seneca is the main language spoken by elders and attendees of this camp, there are a number of attendees who speak the Mohawk language and will offer the address using this language as well. Many program facilitators believe that the erosion of indigenous cultures is in direct relation with the degree to which language is practiced and spoken making language retention and usage high on the camp priority list. Language is also believed to be central to appropriately practicing the Longhouse belief system.

Among the Longhouse beliefs, the meaning and spirit of the ceremonial dances and the welcoming of the new year receive utmost attention. Campers are provided with information on the importance of the ceremonial dances as well as being provided with an opportunity to develop some insight on how these dances are used and performed. Since many of the campers come from different tribal nations and backgrounds, the information presented is meant to serve as a reference guide and each is instructed to explore the finer points of the dances and language interpretations as they apply to each ones respective community upon their return to their home communities. There are subtle

differences and nuances that camp leaders make every effort to respect and protect the integrity of these differences.

Traditional games such as lacrosse are also introduced and played by novices and seasoned players alike. Many of the attendees are exposed to this game for the first time. The more experienced players are always willing to take on added responsibility as they teach the lesser experienced players the finer points of the game. The fun and game activities are always included as part of the camp and balance of these activities is sought to include the life lessons that are the theme of the week.

As the camp has evolved over the years, planners of this event have decided that, based on the return rates of campers from previous years events, there is a developing sense of cultural awareness in their participants and a renewed interest in regaining the culture. This anecdotal data makes organizers optimistic that they are contributing to the vision of planning for the next Seven Generations.

The concept of the "good mind" will be mentioned throughout this paper and is used holistically in context with various activities that are being described. It is important to note that many traditionalists believe that the mind, working in concert with the Creator or Creators, allows the individual to make healthy living choices when considering the use of mood altering substances, dietary content, and ones overall lifestyle. As one continues to develop this pattern for living, the mind and body are strengthened to support each other for the welfare of the person and to develop their mental strength. The good mind is also essential in continuing the transfer of knowledge from one generation to the next; knowledge that must be communicated from a mind that is free of mood altering effects of alcohol and drugs.

Rationale

The goal of the original program organizers was that, upon completion of the week of activities, these youth will, in turn, continue with the practices they have learned and will share them with others. This community based work will aid in developing the good mind which calls, in part, for community service.

Learning about their respective cultures and developing an understanding of the responsibility that each person has for continuing their culture is a major component of the gathering. Some of the more significant social aspects of the programs include developing an understanding of the significance of wampum belts, the importance and role of treaties and of the sovereignty that accompanies these treaty rights. Youth are taught they each have an obligation and responsibility that is associated with the continuance of these social agreements making the participants feel more important as people. This sense of connection and involvement tends to encourage each participant to feel more involved in their role in cultural preservation as well as seeing themselves being vital to their groups' future. This sense of responsibility is identified as one of the most meaningful and those attendees completing the program tend to appreciate and accept this newfound sense of duty with optimism. Program facilitators and leaders are generally pleased with the ability of the campers to comprehend the spirit of the camp and state that they feel confident that they are successful in their efforts.

At the outset of the program, the originators believed that if Native youth were provided with the opportunity to learn more of their culture, to interact with other youth who share similar circumstances and concerns and were provided with a forum to address these concerns in a non-threatening way, they would be able to develop a greater sense of self. Those participants who actively engaged in this week-long set of activities would then be able to more successfully engage in their day to day lives upon returning to live in their "two world" communities (Moran, Fleming, Somervell, Manson, 1999). These two worlds consist of their own local Native communities and neighborhoods and that of the dominant American society. The challenges of living in these two worlds, for Native American youth, is said to be one of the most stressful processes they will ever face particularly when factoring in the influences of poverty, socio-economic conditions, and their experiences with social disenfranchisement (Cameron, 1999).

This paper also recognizes that the adolescents who attend the program have received extensive exposure to the non-indigenous world through non-Native peer groups, education systems, and the media. Thus, the concept of orthogonal cultural

identification whereby the member retains the cultural identities of one or more influences as they attempt to negotiate their way through their daily activities. Oetting states that individuals from multi-cultural backgrounds will draw from their experiences in one or more cultures to achieve their means enabling them to increase their identity in one or more cultures rather than relinquish some cultural traits once they have been exposed to another. The individual develops socialization skills whereby they retain aspects of their culture and incorporate those of another (Oetting, Chiarella, 1998)

As the event has evolved over the years, so too has its purpose, size, and scope. This paper hopes, that by reporting on the activities of the camp and in identifying some of the success stories, it will contribute to the process of discovering whether or not initiatives such as this have an impact on the rates of substance abuse and healthy living. It is meant to be informative and invites others to share their experiences with similar initiatives, most notably in effecting the incidence rates of substance abuse and diabetes among Native American youth. Researchers may also benefit from exploring any differences that might exist when comparing healthy lifestyles and/or substance abuse rates among attendees of camps such as this to those adolescents who do not experience these types of camps.

While the efforts at understanding the impact of summer camps on substance use rates among attendees has not been studied in great detail, this paper acknowledges that the empirical data regarding this type of initiative is scant at best and hopes to contribute the existing body of knowledge on this topic. This paper also offers perspectives for future study.

Overview of Substance Abuse and Youth in Native America

Following is a presentation of the overall snapshot of substance abuse within Native American youth in contemporary American society. It is presented in the spirit of identifying some of the relevant change rates of substance abuse within this population and not designed to imply that all Native Americans experience this level of abuse. The sole purpose of the data presented is to reflect the degree to which this group has experienced greater

morbidity rates from substance abuse than those in other underrepresented groups. Readers should caution against focusing exclusively on the data that could suggest, to the uninformed, that the entire population has a deficit in this area. On the contrary, as this article will illuminate, there have been numerous instances where social effects have been recognized and dealt with by members of this group only to turn potential extinction into strength. The resiliency of this population can be seen not only in the stated effects of this program, but in the steady growth of the group as a whole. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, the American Indian population has increased by more than twenty five thousand since 1990. This data then is presented as a demonstration of resiliency and strength rather than as a sign of deficit.

Within the general population, adolescents in the contemporary United States must face challenges never before experienced in American history. Increased rates of violence experienced at the hands of family members, suicides, and substance abuse overdoses are taking the lives of hundreds of America's youth on a daily basis (Borowsky, Resnick, Ireland, Blum, 1999; Cameron, 1999). Among adolescents, Native American youth experience the highest rates of substance abuse in the U.S., including the abuse of solvent based inhalants (Cameron, 1999; Beauvais, 1996; Plunkett & Mitchell, 2000; Howard et. al, 1999); experience alcoholism rates three times higher than in other youth peer groups (Perkins, Giese, 1994); and experience the highest co-morbid rates of substance related suicide and mental health problems (Herring, 1994; Cameron, 1999; Beauvais, 1996). In addition to experiencing the highest national rates of street illegal drug use, rates of the use of smokeless tobacco products such as snuff and chewing tobacco have increased dramatically within this group during the past ten years leaving many youthful Native American consumers physically scarred for life from the oral lesions produced by the use of these products (Bruerd, 1990; JAMA, 1989).

Native American adolescents also tend to engage in health compromising behaviors such as poor dietary practices and injuries related to substance abuse. Physical problems related to continued mental distress are being experienced at higher rates than their non-Native peers as well (Beauvais, 1996). Of the various minority populations in the United States, Native American

youth experience the largest substance related high school drop-out rates (Cameron, 1999) and are using the widest varieties of the most volatile substances available (Novins & Mitchell, 1998). Of these volatile substances, inhalants are fast becoming one of the more widely abused substances, particularly within the pre-teen Native population. Inhalant use is said to be well on it's way to replacing marijuana as the "gateway" substance for those who develop a dependency on alcohol and/or other drugs (Howard, et. al, 1999). Although marijuana use among Native American youth, which is generally higher for males than for females, should still be regarded as one of the most widely abused gateway drugs (Mitchell & Plunkett, 2000), for those youth who engage in inhalant use, the progression to serious levels of other drug use is much faster for those whose earliest drug use is marijuana and/or alcohol (Herring, 1994). This literature review suggests that there are significant indicators that differentiate the substance abuse problem among indigenous people from those of contemporary society.

Mainstream substance abuse prevention programs have minimal effect when attempting to address the Native American youth population. Unfortunately, many programs that serve Native American client populations fall short of providing adequate treatment services since most are only now starting to become more culturally competent as they begin to incorporate these competencies into their practices (Weaver, 1999).

More recently, the threat of HIV/AIDS is increasing in Native America with the highest rates being identified in the subgroups of Native people who are injecting illegal drugs and engaging in sexual activity. As a result of this combination, the rates of HIV/AIDS among Native Americans has doubled within the last three years (Baldwin, et. al., 1999).

Contemporary Native American Youth

It is widely accepted that societies and groups are the outcome of their historical development and the factors that are significant to their group's development. Some of the issues facing contemporary Native American youth are the direct result of initiatives and government sponsored programs initiated during the late

1800's to mid-1950's; efforts that were said to be designed to address the Indian "problem." These initiatives and programs, particularly those including boarding schools, did more to disrupt Native American life than any other government sponsored effort.

Boarding schools were the result of a governmental policy initiated in 1819 called the *Civilization Fund Act* and was designed to provide legal rights to non-native run agencies and churches whose goal was to *civilize the Indian*. This initiative eventually evolved into little more than militaristic boot camps for Indigenous children where these children were prohibited from speaking their languages, practicing their customs, or using their true names given to them by their Nations (Cross, Earle, Simmons, 2000). The long lasting effects of these schools have led to the steady decline of the natural Native American family system in many areas of North America (Harrod, 1999). In addition to the damaging effects that this initiative has had on the traditional extended family system, communal child rearing practices fell victim to this effort leaving many children feeling abandoned and lost in a world without a connection or in the care of adults who were ill-equipped to occupy the role of parents; having only the abusive child development practices of the boarding school to rely on as a model for their own parenting skills. This condition has been found to significantly contribute to Native American adolescents exorbitantly high rates of suicide, substance abuse, and risky health behaviors which are the highest of any other minority group in North America (Manson, Beals, Dick, Duclos, 1989).

The Program

G. Peter Jemison, Site Manager of Ganondagan Historical site, himself a Seneca, collaborated on the initial effort with Jeannette Miller, Mohawk, and Marcheta "Marky" Davidson, Seneca, who planned this initial event. Ms. Davidson originally introduced the idea of this program in 1980 after having just returned from a similar function in another Native community. The experience had such a dramatic impact on her and the youth in attendance that she felt compelled to promote a similar event in her local community. Since the first gathering at Ganondagan, these orga-

nizers have been joined by numerous volunteers and many others who share their expertise as spiritualists, preparers of traditional foods, and teachers of Native American games, activities, and culture.

Originally, the program was sparsely funded and consisted of about 20 youth attendees who were sponsored by their home territories, public grants and/or private contributions. Local communities sponsored their youth and volunteers/chaperones for this camp. Attendance at the inaugural camp consisted primarily of Senecas from the Western New York State area. The program is also supported by members of Mohawk territory in northern New York state which is located near the Canadian border. Over the past several years, the numbers of youth attendees has steadily increased to about fifty for the event and has welcomed some youth from as far away as California and Washington, D.C.

The goal of the camp is to teach the youth that by learning and incorporating their cultural values and practices into their lives that they can develop that which is referred to as the "good mind"; a mind that is not influenced by mood altering substances, serves them in healthy decision making processes, and helps to develop balance in their lives. Many traditional First Nations people believe that a good mind is necessary in order to live up to the expectations and directions given to each member by the Creator. These directions include continued traditional practices, fairness in dealing with others, and a commitment to serve ones community in supportive ways. In order to accomplish this, the program consists of a number of activities that are designed to keep the participants actively engaged in physical wellness through exercise, activities designed to stimulate learning about their traditional culture, spirituality, engaging in team sports.

Games such as lacrosse have long been enjoyed and used by indigenous people to aid in teamwork and other group activities. The health benefits of a game as rigorous as lacrosse make it one of the most beneficial health promoting activities one can engage in. The effective socialization of the campers who play is also important since this activity aids in helping the players to feel included and welcome; as if they are an active participant and promotes the goal of establishing social support. The social

aspects, as well as the physical and cognitive benefits of playing this game have a role in promoting sustained wellness.

Gaining knowledge of traditional foods and how they are prepared is also increasing in popularity among the youth. This is particularly pleasing to the camp organizers since they have recognized that, within many indigenous communities, there is an alarming increase in the number of youth who are being diagnosed with adult onset diabetes. Corn, beans, and squash, referred to as the "Three Sisters", factor in heavily as staples of traditional dishes prepared by the campers and the elders who present this aspect of the program feel much satisfaction and joy in the contribution each is making in sustaining this aspect of the culture. There are currently plans underway to address dietary concerns to a greater degree at future gatherings.

There is also considerable activity involved in learning the meanings of traditional ceremonies, traditional dancing, beadwork, basket weaving, and participating in "talking circles." Camp organizers believe that all aspects of traditional Haudenosaunee culture are important and that exposure to the youth is critical in making their camping experience a success. This holistic approach to addressing the needs of Native American youth is consistent with a number of similar camp initiatives gaining momentum nationwide and includes teaching them the importance of drawing on the practices of their elders in achieving total wellness of their bodies, minds, and in providing service to their community (Perkins, Giese, 1994; Reston, 1994; Vollers, 1996). Maintaining a focus on this type of activity is believed to be one of the most significant factors in helping the youth to develop the good mind and it's expected that this approach to living will be modeled to their counterparts upon their return to their home community.

The typical day begins with a round of prayers and offerings of traditional tobacco at sunrise at around 5:30 am followed by some light exercise and then breakfast which sets the tone that this camp experience is not going to be some leisurely lounge around time. Some campers jokingly state that, when they are in their own communities, they are usually just returning home at this time. As a result, this early wake up call is quite a shock to many of their sleep patterns. All participants are expected to attend

this ceremony which consists of burning tobacco as an offering of thanks to the Creator and of saying prayers or asking for guidance and strength in preparation for the days activities that lie ahead. In one aspect, the tobacco burning ceremony is significant in that the purity of the smoke is believed to carry the prayers, of those gathered, to the Creator. It should be noted that the campers are not forced into, nor are they taught any particular brand of "religion," but are instead encouraged by Haudenosaunee spiritual leaders to look within themselves and to others for strength. Many of the youth, as a result of this encouragement, begin to find sources of strength and/or spirituality that they may not have otherwise had the opportunity to seek. Walking the peaceful early morning trails of Ganondagan and stretching the body is necessary after a night of sleeping on the ground. Walking the grounds affords the attendee the opportunity to reflect on the wealth of heritage and history that can be learned as they read the plaques and markers along each trail that describe the lives of the first inhabitants of this site. Another reason for the stretch is that many of the activities that follow tend to require much sitting and listening to traditional elders as they speaking about indigenous culture while providing some insights for practicing these values and beliefs. Experience has shown that many of the adolescents have little to no practice in this, (sitting and listening), and instead have adopted to the ways of the dominant society where speaking out of turn and demonstrating minimal respect for elders seems to be the norm. It should be noted that this behavior doesn't go unrecognized by the elders and is thought to be partly the result of having minimal exposure to these practices. That being the case, youth are not punished for this behavior. Instead, youth who experience difficulty in listening to the teachings of the camp leaders are redirected to become more in tune with the value of respect of their elders and the wisdom each has to offer. Before the end of the week, most of the youth who come into the camp as somewhat rebellious and overactive seem to appreciate the structure and direction offered to them. As in any gathering of this type, however, there are those who decide that this type of structure isn't for them and promptly leave.

Part of the daily program offers translations and discussion of the traditional Thanksgiving Address described earlier. The

Message of the Peacemaker describes the manner in people treat others with respect and work towards commonality and agreement. This Message warns of the perils of divisiveness when resolving contentious issues and the importance of consensus making for important decisions. The contributions to the Great Law of Peace, which encourages the relinquishing of resentments between individuals and groups so that all can live in harmony, is also a major component of the learning activities. Camp organizers have also recognized that Native youth experience many aspects of Haudenosaunee culture in settings where these are presented in the native language only and that many of the youth lack an understanding of the language. This lack of understanding makes much of the wisdom contained in these messages non-accessible. During the camp these addresses are generally spoken in the Seneca language but are also spoken in accordance with the specific variation of the other member nations as well as English for those without indigenous language skills. Therefore, care is taken to ensure that the various teachings are interpreted in accordance with the attendees language keeping in mind that the nuances of each nation differ and that some campers speak only English. Resources for continued learning of their native language is provided to the youth so that they can continue to learn their language upon return to their respective communities.

Taking on the responsibility for the preparation and service of the food is also seen as critical to the success of the youth's experience while at the camp and, as a community effort, is one of the most important aspects of the program. Many of the traditional dishes, such as corn soup, require diligence, time, and much work in order for it to be prepared successfully. Being of service to the community in preparing the food is as much a symbolic need as it is one of necessity. Service to the community is seen as vital to the success of this and other such camping experiences. A Cherokee youth fitness camp reports similar success when promoting cultural retention through practicing of traditional values, beliefs, and approaches to spirituality, particularly when focusing on the importance of service to the community and in taking responsibility for their service roles (Perkins, L. K. & Giese, M. L., 1994).

Engaging in traditional team sports tends to be one of the most enjoyable aspects of this camp for youth. It is during these

activities that many bonds are made and friendships are initiated that have endured over the years. Many of the youth return every year and these relationships are renewed as while creating linkages for them to network with other Native youth. This linkage is particularly crucial to those who live off of the reservation and who may not have the benefit of knowing other Native Americans from their peer group. Research has shown that while many minority groups experience some culture separation as a result of living in two worlds, Native American youth experience greater degrees of disenfranchisement since prejudice against their racial group is supported in contemporary society in the form of stereotypical sports team mascots, educational systems with insensitive stereotypical approaches and portrayals of their culture, and of having to endure life in a society that degrades their ethnic identities (Moran, Fleming, Somervell, Manson, 1999).

"Talking circles" are also part of the program. Talking circles are group activities that allow for the attendees to share, in a non-threatening and supportive environment, issues that are upsetting to them and where the camper may wish to address personal concerns and seek support for resolving this issue. Participants take turns to share what's going on in their lives and are given undivided attention of the others. For many, this is the first time they have ever felt acknowledged and completely heard or listened to—that their voice means something. Many participants, youth and adult chaperones alike, regard this activity as one of the more emotionally stimulating and powerful of their experiences at the camp. Personally distressing issues that have laid dormant for years, sometimes decades, are released during this activity creating an atmosphere of increased trust and commitment among those who engage in the talking circle.

The significance of this activity is that participants are able to discuss some of their most personal concerns and feel comfortable in knowing that they are not alone in their struggles. Many leave this activity feeling much freedom from stress related to their problems and a sense of shared unity with other youth who may be experiencing similar dilemmas. The promotion of mental wellness is a hallmark of this activity.

The day generally ends around 10 PM. with discussions around the fire where the youth are invited to share the events of the day and assist in the direction for planning the next days

events. A social dance is usually held on the last night where members of the community and volunteers are invited to participate in closing ceremonies.

The social dance at this camp consists of campers, elders, and community members having a dinner provided by the campers at late afternoon. This dinner is followed by a gathering around a fire where a drum and singing group will perform traditional songs for all to dance to. The dance usually has someone on hand to provide the Thanksgiving Address to those guests who have joined for the evening and to wish them a safe trip home upon the completion. The host also provides a description of the song and a history of its significance to the society.

Future Plans and Initiatives

Future plans for this gathering are twofold. First, it is the hope of the organizers that there will be a preparatory type of gathering for the youth who been attending over the years so that they can assume a more active role in the actual operation of the camp function and activities. Several of the youth will be making their third or fourth return and, since they have demonstrated the ability to serve in leadership roles, these youth will be afforded the opportunity to serve as community chaperones and small group leaders. As one youth attendee writes, this is the chance "to give youth from Akwasasne the chance that I got to learn so much about myself and my history and my culture" as she assumes a leadership role for the first time in 2001 (David, 2000). In time, she hopes that by sharing her experiences, she will initiate added interest in this type of program and will host similar events in her community. This aim is supported by a large number of researchers who have argued the best efforts at providing long-term effectiveness of programs initiated within reservations are most effective when it is a community-based effort (Cheadle, Pearson, Wagner, Psaty, Diehr, Koepsell, 1995).

Plans for the future include an added focus on foods and healthy dietary habits. Focusing on dietary needs and leading healthier lifestyles is said to be a central concern within many Native American communities. Diabetes is recognized as a growing and significant health problem for increasing numbers of

Native Americans and indigenous communities. Some Nations are reporting that the rates of type two diabetes is at fifty percent (American Diabetes Association, 2000).

In a study using Indian Health Services data that was collected from 1990 to 1997, statistics show a 29% increase in the incidence of type 2 diabetes among indigenous Americans and Alaskans with women showing a significantly higher rate of increase than men and those representing the Alaska subset showing a 76% increase overall (Burrows, Geiss, Engelaug & Acton, 2000).

One Native youth camp sponsored by the University of Arizona focuses exclusively on the physical wellness of its participants; particularly in ways for participants to both manage obesity and in learning how to monitor blood sugar levels due to their increased rates of type 2 diabetes—the type known as adult onset diabetes that is normally found in people over thirty years of age (Sterba, 1997). Personal wellness and improved health status for Native Americans is going to be one of the vehicles by which the strengthening of Nations can be achieved; primarily by reducing the incidence of diabetes. Since the disease of diabetes is such a rapidly growing problem within Indian Country, the strategy of providing diabetes education as a prevention effort will significantly improve the quality of life for this generation and Seven Generations hence. As so many of the elders and supporters of this event will say, “it begins with the youth.”

The ideal outcome of this camp, according to organizers, is for the youth who attend this camp consistently to return to their home communities and develop similar initiatives locally. There has been overwhelming support from other communities who have supported their youth’s attendance at this camp and many adults are beginning to develop strategies to host similar events. It is believed that if more youth experience this type of camping event that the host community will benefit overall. It is expected that it will be their youth and the community members in general who increase the likelihood of developing healthier lifestyles, increased mental wellness, and increased retention of cultural traits. In keeping with the spirit of the “good mind and in preparing for the seventh generation, organizers and attendees of this camp feel convinced that it has the ability to satisfy these aims.

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