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Boys & Girls Clubs of America
1230 W. Peachtree St. NW
Atlanta, GA 30309-3447

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Reaching Out to Native American Youth
Changing Generations • The Maine Connection • Saving Young Lives in Alaska

Changing Lives for Generations to Come

Lakota Children Succeed in South Dakota

Growing up on the Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota, SuAnne Big Crow always dreamed of a safe, fun place where she and her friends could be free of bigotry, drugs, alcohol and other destructive forces. A basketball star and honor student, SuAnne became well known as a role model in her community.

When SuAnne's life was tragically cut short by an automobile accident, the community banded together to make her dream come true. Their efforts resulted in the SuAnne Big Crow Boys & Girls Club – one of the first Clubs ever chartered on an Indian reservation.

The Club, which opened its doors in 1992, serves children of the Oglala Lakota Nation. The flagship facility is located in a county where 46.2 percent of the children live below the poverty line and on a reservation where half of the population is under age 18. The Club provides children with much-needed youth development programs administered by professionally trained staff.

Following President Bill Clinton's visit to Pine Ridge in 1999, the White House asked Boys & Girls Clubs of America to head a special initiative to build a brand new facility for the SuAnne Big Crow Club. The Oglala Lakota community, and the U.S. Departments of Housing and Urban Development, Justice, Interior and Agriculture soon joined the partnership.

In June 2002, the new 30,000-sq. ft., state-of-the-art SuAnne Big Crow Boys & Girls Club was unveiled. The facility includes a soccer field, indoor pool, gymnasium, library and technology center.

Fortunately, a tribal initiative enabled the Club to develop and open three satellite sites in an effort to reach more youth. While the organization currently serves some 850 Pine Ridge youth, there are approximately 20,000 Oglala Lakota young people throughout the reservation, the second largest in the United States.

"Every person and program in this Boys & Girls Club can change a child's life and generations to come," says Leatrice "Chick" Big Crow, SuAnne's mother and executive director of the Club. "The new facility will enable more of our children to choose the values SuAnne lived by: a 'can do' attitude and the importance of working toward a dream."



"The Club is a place where kids can have fun and enjoy the good things in life and not have to worry about bullies or peer pressure – the Club did that for me. And if I ever needed somebody to talk to, there were always people there that I could look up to. For me, it was a place where I felt comfortable. Being there made me a confident person."

- Jessica Whirlwind Soldier, A 10-year Club member and senior at Pine Ridge High School



North to Alaska

In the vast expanses of our nation's largest and northernmost state, reaching out to youth involves unique challenges. First, there's the geography: Club professionals have to fly, not drive, to most locations. Then there's the incredible diversity of the state's population: while the majority of residents are non-Native, the three main Native groups – Eskimos, Indians and Aleuts – represent 196 tribes.

"The challenges tend to be greater in our Alaska Native communities," says John Oates, chief executive officer for the Boys & Girls Clubs of Southcentral Alaska. "Alcohol, drugs and particularly suicide – we are tackling these issues head on."

The Clubs offer a blend of traditional Boys & Girls Club programming, such as drug and alcohol prevention initiatives, and cultural activities, including drumming, dancing, singing and carving.

In 2002, the Clubs served 20,000 youth, including non-Native young people. But kids aren't the only ones active in the Clubs; they have also become extremely popular among adults in the communities they serve.



"We have learned that Boys & Girls Clubs are an opportunity for elders and parents to teach kids about their culture," continues Oates. Including elders, parents and tribal leaders in the Club program "weaves Native American culture into the very fabric of the Clubhouse environment," he said.

Oates thinks that the Boys & Girls Club approach makes Clubs especially effective in addressing difficult matters.

"We raise the bar of hope and expectations for these kids," he says. "We let them know we are there for them, that we have expectations of them and that we'll help them succeed. When Boys & Girls Clubs are filling minds with all these hopes, kids feel that and develop expectations for themselves.

"We are driven by the vision of saving lives – literally," concludes Oates.



The Suicide Wall

When the Boys & Girls Clubs of Southcentral Alaska launched an outreach program for Native youth, they began in remote village of Tyonek. This tiny community of approximately 150 Athabascan Indians had been plagued by alcoholism and a terrible teenage suicide problem, averaging more than one such death every year. The problem was so bad that tribal elders constructed a Suicide Wall to list the names of the young victims.

Since the Boys & Girls Club opened in 1993, not one child has taken his or her own life, and the Suicide Wall has been removed. Today, every youth in the village is a member of the Club, and names are now being added to the Youth of the Month Wall, which recognizes positive contributions by the young people in the village.

"We teach them that life and success are journeys, not destinations," says John Oates, chief executive officer for the Clubs. "If you do that, there is no room for thoughts of suicide."

A Personal Perspective

This article was written by Ron Gurley, chief professional officer for the Boys & Girls Clubs of Green Country, Okla.

Growing up in Pryor, Okla., I fondly remember the stories my Cherokee grandmother told of living off the land, making use of everything around her. Yet I also recall how rare those stories were; how my grandmother was cautious about sharing our culture because she had been punished as a girl for speaking our native language and wearing native dress. I wondered why we had to be so careful, and tried to understand where I fit in.

As an adult, I never forgot the internal struggles I faced as a child. When I began teaching within the Cherokee Nation, I saw those same struggles in my students – not only did they face cultural differences, they also dealt with other issues such as violence, drugs and teen pregnancy. I often watched school buses leaving after school, wondering if the kids would be back the next day.

With the help of local school superintendents, police chiefs and elders of the community, we decided to do something. Starting with nothing more than an old feed store, we transformed an old structure into a teen center, which was eventually converted into a Boys & Girls Club.

To keep Native American cultural values alive, programs at the Boys & Girls Clubs of Green Country incorporate Cherokee traditions. Through activities such as storytelling by elders, members not only get a sense of their history and culture, they are also taught how to handle tough issues. And through B&GCA programs such as Club Service and AmeriCorps, many members are giving back to the Club while saving money for college and earning scholarships.

In just over four years, the feed store has grown from five members to eight Club units, serving 1,400 youth. Native American kids in our community now have a positive place to go where they are able to share their concerns, questions, hopes and dreams.



At Boys & Girls Clubs of America, we focus on the future of our nation's youth. We'd like to help you focus on *your* future by sending you a copy of the Personal Affairs Record Booklet.

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The Maine Connection

Clubs Reach Out to Children of the Penobscot Nation

Just off the coast of Maine lies Indian Island, home to the Penobscot Nation. Since 2000, the island has also been home to the first Native American Boys & Girls Club in the Northeast region of the United States.

“Boys & Girls Club work is all about identifying the needs of youth,” says Ken Walsh, who helps to oversee the Penobscot Nation Boys & Girls Club. “Our mission is second to none and, through our professional staff, we can make a big difference in young lives.”

In 1999, Walsh and others took the first steps toward establishing a Club to serve children of the Penobscot Nation. They started by renovating an old gym whose concrete floor

had seen better days. The brand new wooden floors they installed were the first ever on the island.

With support from several sources, including Boys & Girls Clubs of America, the Penobscot Club is now a state-of-the-art facility.



Every young person on the reservation – about 200 – is a Club member. When young relatives come to visit, they are immediately introduced to the Club. It has truly become the center of activity for youth on the island.

The Club provides such traditional Boys & Girls Clubs of America programming as drug and alcohol prevention, and tutoring. To ensure that programming is as effective as possible, Club staff incorporate culturally-specific aspects. For instance, athletic programs feature one of the most popular activities on the island: canoeing. Other specialized programming includes Native American dance fundamentals and basket-weaving.

Walsh, who has formed a tight bond with Penobscot Nation Chief Barry Dana, believes that Boys & Girls Clubs are successful in Native American communities because they work closely with tribal leaders and members.

“Boys & Girls Clubs of America respects Native Americans’ rich history and heritage,” he said. “To know more about that history is going to make us all better.”

THE FACTS ON NATIVE AMERICANS*

- 559 federally recognized tribes
- 2.4 million self-identified Native Americans
- Nearly 1.2 million are children (18 years and under)

CHALLENGES

- 75% of the Native American workforce earns less than \$7,000 a year
- 48% of Native Americans do not finish high school
- 1 in 6 Native American adolescents have attempted suicide

*Trends in Indian Health, 1998-1999, published by the Department of Interior, Indian Health Services.

Forging A New Path

Imagine growing up in a community that offers few educational or employment opportunities, is 200 miles from the nearest town, and is overwhelmed by such risk factors as poverty, drug use and staggering alcoholism rates. How would this affect your childhood and consequently your adult life?

Unfortunately, this scenario is all too common for young people growing up on Native American lands. For far too long, these youth and their communities have been without the support and resources they need to overcome enormous odds and create hope for a brighter future.

For more than 140 years, the Boys & Girls Club experience has positively affected America's young people, with an emphasis on providing valuable programs and services to youth from the most challenging economic and societal backgrounds. In fact, Boys & Girls Clubs of America's (B&GCA's) mission is to inspire and enable all young people, especially those from disadvantaged circumstances, to realize their full potential as productive, responsible and caring citizens.

Given the specific challenges facing Indian youth, reaching out to Native American young people is a natural fit with B&GCA's mission. For the past decade, Boys & Girls Clubs of America has worked closely with tribal and community leaders to establish Clubs on Indian lands. Today, some 60,000 Native

youth are served by 142 Clubs in 25 states. But we aren't stopping there: we plan to open 24 new Native American Clubs this year. As long as Native youth can benefit from Boys & Girls Clubs, we will be there for them.

This issue of *The Positive Place* features profiles of a handful of our Native Clubs, from Maine to North Dakota to Alaska. The common thread that runs through all of these stories is the enormous difference that a positive, pro-active outreach effort can have on underserved populations. In just a few short years, Clubs have made a big difference.

If you would like to support our Native American initiative, please contact me at 404-487-5818 or via e-mail at rparker@bgca.org.

Thank you, our friends and donors, for making this important work possible.



Sincerely,

Rob Parker

Senior Vice President,
Resource Development



B & G C A ' S M I S S I O N

**To inspire and enable all young people,
especially those from disadvantaged
circumstances, to realize their full potential
as productive, responsible and caring citizens.**

*Boys & Girls Clubs of America comprises a national network
of more than 3,000 neighborhood-based facilities,
serving some 3.3 million young people annually.*

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Editor:
Kelly Gaines

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**Comments, articles and
letters can be sent to:**
Rob Parker, Senior Vice President
Resource Development
Boys & Girls Clubs of America
1230 W. Peachtree St. NW
Atlanta, GA 30309-3447
404-487-5818
e-mail: rparker@bgca.org