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# In Our Own Words: Service Learning in Native Communities

by McClellan Hall

One of the things that has interested me over the years in terms of Native education is that what you call Service Learning, is how Native people transmitted knowledge and culture in their own communities. (Roger Buffalohead, remarks during the First Annual National Conference on Service Learning, 1991).

This quote is one of many that have come to our attention in recent years and captures the spirit of the National Indian Youth Leadership Project in its efforts to initiate and promote active, thoughtful, authentic service in Native communities. Over the past twelve years, we have discovered numerous examples of how service learning has been practiced in Native cultures and have identified several terms that describe the process in Native languages.

As a Cherokee, I am most familiar with the concept of *gadugi*, a traditional practice based on interdependency and reciprocity among clans and families. A call for *gadugi* results in people coming together, much in the same way as the early pioneers in the American West came together to raise a barn or help a family in need. The *gadugi* tradition has been the blueprint for the service component of the National Indian Youth Leadership Project (NIYLP).

Back in 1980 when the ideas for the NIYLP model were germinating in Cherokee country, one of the best examples of contemporary *gadugi* was the project coordinated by Wilma Mankiller in the small Cherokee community of Bell, Oklahoma. In those days, Wilma was Director of Community Development, while I was Director of Stilwell Academy, the Cherokee Nation alternative high school. Wilma, myself, and other Cherokee Nation staff may not have been aware of the roots or the approaches of the "Service Movement,"

as it is now called, but we had our own models. While this project contained all of the elements recently described by Eliot Wigginton (1986) in the project planning process used by his Foxfire classes, it was organically Cherokee.

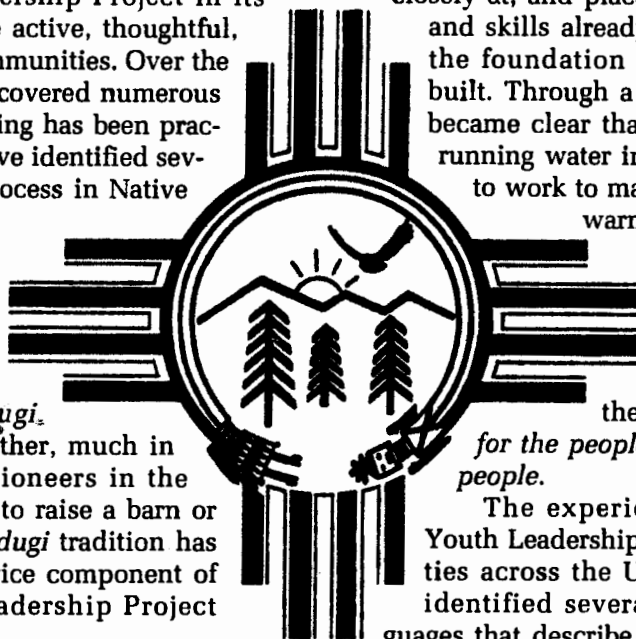
A thorough assessment in the Cherokee language was the starting point for the Bell project. Consistent with the traditional approach, the assessment looked closely at, and placed great value in, the strengths and skills already present in the community as the foundation upon which this project was built. Through a consensus building process, it became clear that people in Bell really wanted running water in their homes and were willing to work to make it a reality. In spite of many warnings that the project would not

succeed, the residents of Bell did their share and more.

The community came back together around the *gadugi* concept. Rather than asking the government to do the project for the people, this project was done by the people.

The experience of the National Indian Youth Leadership Project with Native communities across the United States and Canada has identified several other terms in Native languages that describe the service ethic. In the Keres language, spoken by the people of Acoma, Laguna, and Zia pueblos, the term *si-yuu-dze* translates to "everybody's work" and refers to communal service where people get together to clean the irrigation ditches in the spring, plant corn, clean the plazas for ceremonies, etc. In the Zuni language, the term *yanse'Lihanna* has a similar meaning.

These concepts can be traced to the original teachings, passed on through oral tradition for thousands of years in Native as well as in other cultures throughout the world. In the Cherokee tradition, it is taught that the Creator made the different races of people and sent them to different parts of the world with specific instructions and responsibilities. The Native people of the North American continent were entrusted to be caretakers of this place. The songs and prayers used in Cherokee ceremonies, for example, acknowledge the



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other races of people by name and emphasize our relationship to each other. With the five hundredth anniversary of our reunion on this continent, it is clear that most of those who came from Europe didn't recognize the Native people here as relatives. Many of the early missionaries did not realize that our ancestors were providing a valuable spiritual service. Prayers for the benefit of the entire creation would seem to be a common ground that people of all cultures could support.

The importance of service in the reclamation of the continent cannot be overstated. It represents a place to start, a way to empower people, especially young people, to regain control of our communities, on our own terms—in our own words.

We are all learning more about the power and nature of dependent relationships from the extensive body of knowledge on co-dependency in our society. It is clear that dependent relationships exist, not only in classrooms where students are not encouraged to think for themselves, but rather to wait for the teacher to provide the "answer," but they also exist on a community level. As the result of generations of paternalistic government policy, many contemporary Native people have somehow lost their focus on the true significance of what is reserved in our treaties. As proud, independent people, it is difficult to imagine that our ancestors intended treaty language to be a prescription for a lifestyle of dependency.

The National Indian Youth Leadership Project uses an approach that focuses on "habilitation" both of young people and communities. This term is simply defined as a process of becoming capable, not through self-centered individualism, but through interdependency. To accomplish this, we promote three levels of service: traditional/community generated service, program generated service, and student generated service.

### **Traditional/Community Generated Service**

These would be the *gadugi* type projects that were described earlier. In addition, we include activities where the community or individuals come together to recognize, through ceremony and celebration, the rites of passage that young people traditionally go through in the process of reaching adulthood successfully. Recently, the NIYLP has been involved in reviving these recognition events where they are no longer practiced. In the Navajo tradition, for example, the puberty ceremony for females is still commonplace. Unfortunately, the ceremony for boys has nearly been forgotten. In the spring of 1992, we brought several 12-14 year old boys together near Sweetwater, Arizona, for the initial phase of the ritual. A medicine man who remembers the procedure took the boys through a sweat lodge and began the instruction in the roles and responsibilities of manhood. We want to provide what our

young people need to help them take their places as productive members of their communities.

### **Program Generated Service**

Through examining a spectrum of issues all the way from the local to the global levels (i.e., environmental concerns), and building consensus on priorities, we have initiated the following activities:

- Establishing a state and tribally sanctioned search and rescue program made up of high school aged youth from Zuni Pueblo.
- Developing an integrated unit at Twin Buttes High School (Zuni) which focuses on issues involved with the recent Zuni land claims settlement. Students are studying erosion and its impact on their reservation, and are creating a "before and after" slide show based on ideas for improvement projects that students will plan, conduct, and evaluate.
- Working on restoration of a two hundred and fifty year old church at Picuris Pueblo. The community is rebuilding the church with all volunteer labor. We provided a crew of sixty youth and adults and made one thousand adobe bricks by hand. We still hold the record for most adobes made in one day.
- Painting the tribal office buildings, including the governor's office at Jemez Pueblo.
- Working with the National Park Service, cleaning and preserving Anasazi ruins, and providing trail maintenance and erosion control.
- Adopting several miles of highway on the Acoma Pueblo for which Acoma students are cleaning and caring.
- Developing the "Buddy Works" program at Acoma Pueblo, where seventh and eighth graders adopt kindergarten buddies and provide reading and tutoring service. The older students prepare lesson plans and make materials.

### **Student Generated Service**

Several examples of student generated projects are:

- Students participated in a field-based Navajo history unit in Canyon DeChelley on the Navajo reservation where they learned about the destruction of Navajo homes and food supplies at the hands of Kit Carson and the United States Army in the 1860s. One student was so moved by the presentation, that he suggested that we could begin to do our part by planting new peach trees all over the canyon. Although this project was originally somewhat symbolic, we did plant the peach trees and have continued to do so since 1989.
- Zuni high school students decided they wanted to spend quality time with senior citizens. They are now painting murals on the walls of the new seniors' center and they are involved in intergenerational cul-

tural exchanges, where both groups take turns doing the teaching and learning.

- Junior high students in Taos, New Mexico, were recently recognized by their tribe for helping with a Pow Wow and raising money for local runners.

### Service as an Entry Point

In the early 1980's, as Director of the Stilwell Academy, I often visited Crosslin Smith, a religious leader of the Keetoowah Cherokees, a traditional group that still practices the traditional religion. In one conversation, as I was sharing my frustrations and concerns, Crosslin talked about how, long ago, Cherokee spiritual leaders fasted and went to a sacred place, performing the necessary rituals to see into the future. "We already know these things will happen," he warned, "we have seen it coming," referring to the difficult times young people are facing. Although he never prescribed what could or should be done, I took this as a challenge to see what difference I could make.

Judging by the newspaper headlines, drop out rates, and reports about gang activity in Native communities, we're now living in the times that the Cherokee elders saw when they looked into the future many generations ago. The negative opportunities for our youth often seem to outnumber the positive, and young people are trading away their culture for something far less valuable.

As Native people, I've always felt that we have a responsibility to give something back. As parents,

teachers, coaches, and mentors, we have an exciting opportunity to provide the most valuable service of all, that of simply providing a positive example. Changes need to be made in Native communities; there are some extremely destructive cycles that need to be interrupted by positive, caring individuals. Service can provide an entry point to bring those young people who have been alienated back into the circle. There are exciting new programs waiting to be developed, based on a template that has been available to us all along. We can start anywhere. Let's begin by taking a look at our communities, not to identify problems, but to find the strengths on which we can build. Let's look for those things that need to be done and for those who can do them. Let's not overlook those whose greatest need is to do something that will be recognized and appreciated by others. We can start this process from a traditional values base that has been with us for as long as anyone can remember. Service can represent an act of faith—both in our communities and in our young people.

As Bernie Bearskin said in Studs Terkel's book *Division Street America*:

I think perhaps that my early training in the home impressed me with the philosophy of our forebears. It was taught to us that if one could be of service to the people, this is one of the greatest honors there is.

### References

Wigginton, E. (1986). *Sometimes a shining moment*. New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday.