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## In Our Own Language: Youth as Servant Leaders

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## In Our Own Language: Youth as Servant Leaders

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*I think that perhaps 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 his people, this is one of the greatest honors there is.*

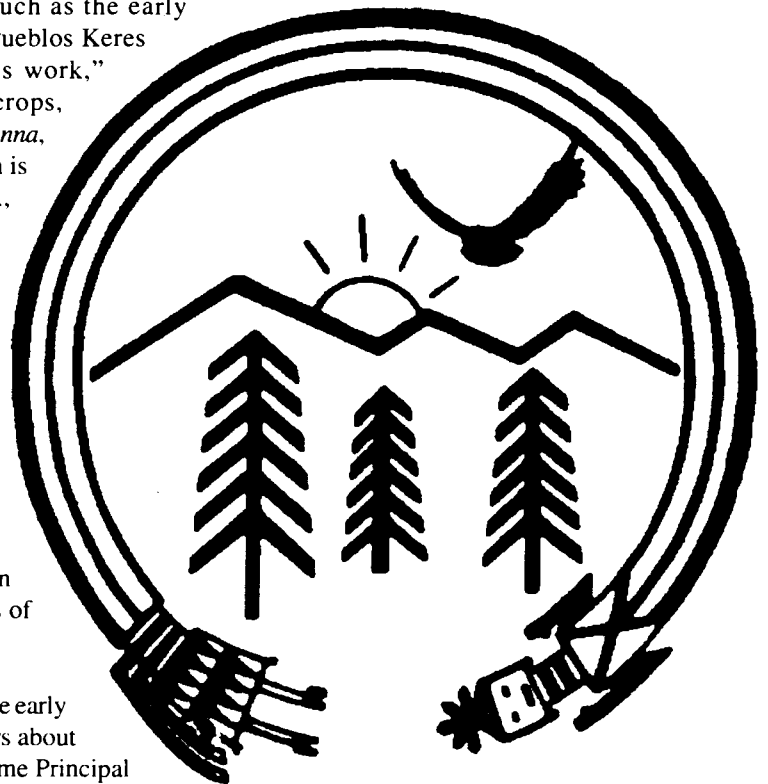
— Bernie Bearskin (Winnebago)

One of the most powerful words in the language of my Cherokee tradition is *gadugi*, a call to bring people together to help one another — much as the early European settlers came together for barn raisings. In the Pueblos Keres language, the term *si-yudze* translates as “everybody’s work,” referring to communal service, where all join to plant crops, prepare for ceremonies, and so forth. The Zuni words, *yanse’ lihanna*, have similar meaning. Underlying this ethic of service which is common to Native cultures across North America, is the celebration of kinship and mutual interdependence — in the Lakota words, *mitakuya owasin*, “we are all as relatives.” The National Indian Youth Leadership Project (NIYLP) draws upon this rich cultural heritage to address problems of alienation, school dropout, delinquency, and substance abuse, which are prevalent among our Native American youth.

Many current programs for reclaiming youth have counterparts in Native American traditions. Examples include experiential education, mentoring, wilderness challenge, and most prominently, service learning. The NIYLP program gains its inspiration both from traditional sources and from contemporary models of youth development.

As director of the Cherokee Nation’s alternative high school in the early Eighties, I spent many hours in conversation with tribal leaders about risks confronting our youth. Wilma Mankiller, who later became Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, was then creating a quiet revolution by using our traditional concept of *gadugi* to empower residents of rural communities to solve their problems. Further inspiration came from James Kielsmeier of the National Youth Leadership Council, who had developed a multicultural service-learning model. From these modest beginnings, a spark is brightening into a flame, analogous to the sacred fire that has burned through the history of the Cherokee people.

Generations of cultural conflict have disrupted long established patterns of education and child rearing among Native Americans. The following chart contrasts traditional parenting to the patterns of the present and highlights the NIYLP approach to reclaiming this cultural heritage for our youth:



“National Indian Leadership Project Logo”

## Native American Parenting —Then & Now

### Then

Respect for the child as a gift from the creator; parenting skills and values passed on to youth; discipline consistent; morals and ethics taught by example

Child free to develop at own pace; experiential learning

People learn from Nature: Consequences are consistent and real

Community works together; interdependence

### Now

Child abuse; drug/alcohol abuse; values unclear; no support system; loss of parenting skills and values; influence of media often in conflict with Native American values

Mass education, child judged by non Indian standards, testing, labeling, etc. Schools geared to Anglo-Western learning styles and approaches

Lack of experiential opportunity; learning often removed from consequences; spoiled and sheltered kids

Communities fragmented; little volunteerism; youth generally viewed as recipients of services

### NIYLP Approaches

Teach respect for every human being; talk about parenting, sex roles, and responsibilities; teach by example

Individuality respected; ask each person only to "do the best you can" in meeting challenges; emphasize challenging experiences as basis of new learning; engage both brain hemispheres through creative play and activity

Entire program is experiential; get kids to "try on" roles, learn from mistakes; provide supportive but challenging environment; help explain and discuss cause and effect; processing of experience though dialogue is critical

View youth as resources to be tapped; encourage youth to participate, plan projects, and initiate action

*Abridged from McClellan Hall (1991), **The National Indian Youth Leadership Model: A Manual for Program Leaders**. Gallup, NM: National Indian Youth Leadership Project.*

In 1982, a group of Cherokee students first attended a multicultural National Youth Leadership Camp. They had the lowest pre-test self-esteem scores of any ethnic group but, by the end of the experience, had made the highest gains of any participating group. This was the beginning of what became the National Indian Youth Leadership Project, which operates a variety of programs serving Native American youth in many areas of the country.

The project uses an approach that focuses on "habilitation" both of young people and communities. This is defined as the process of becoming capable, not through self-centered individualism, but through interdependence and service.

Seventh- and eighth-graders attend a summer Leadership Camp as an "ignition" experience, but the goal is to apply the acquired skills back home in a year-round plan of activities. Each youth participating in the Leadership Camp is asked to identify a mentor from his or her school community. The mentor is a respected adult, with expertise in an area of interest, who will jointly

plan with the youth ways of transferring the skills acquired during camp to activities in the community.

Older high school students attend a National Youth Leadership Conference, which offers multicultural training to dissolve racial barriers and build cultural self-respect. Subsequently, these youth become positive role models working as staff in the camp for younger youth and engage in a wealth of community-development projects.

The activities in these programs are as diverse as environmental ethics, whitewater rafting, and leadership seminars. Students examine tolerance, morals and ethics in leadership, health promotion, alcohol/drug abuse, and cultural appreciation. Combining action with reflection, they become involved in a wealth of experiential learning activities. They are confronted with a series of demands carrying a certain amount of risk — social, intellectual and physical — and they come to see themselves as capable of taking risks and accomplishing goals.

Young people learn leadership by "doing leadership." They discover this new model of "servant leader" as one who leads by helping and

empowering others. As they return to their communities, the stage is set for a wealth of service learning activities. These are some examples:

Establishing state- and tribally-sanctioned Search and Rescue programs staffed by high school-age youth from Zuni Pueblo.

Instituting a "Buddy Works" program at Acoma where seventh- and eighth-graders adopt kindergarten buddies and provide reading and tutoring services.

Joining with community adults in Picuris Pueblo to restore a 250-year-old church. The crew made 1,000 adobe bricks by hand!

Youth are a window to the future. Through them we can anticipate the shape of the world to come. Too often, as Native American children grow older, their interest and success in school diminishes. The future is not encouraging for many of these youths who struggle in failure-laced settings. In contrast, this leadership-development model offers young people a different vision of the future and skills to make a difference in transforming themselves and their communities.

Students who have been part of the program are now generating their own proposals for community service. For example, in a unit on history in Canyon de Chelly, Navajo Reservation students learned about the destruction of Native American homes and food supplies by Kit Carson and the U.S. Army in the 1860s. A youth was so moved that he suggested planting new peach trees all over the canyon. We did and have continued to do so since 1989. Zuni high school students wanted to spend quality time with senior citizens. They are now painting murals on the walls of the new senior center and are involved in intergenerational cultural exchanges, where both groups take turns doing the teaching and learning.

An initial five-year evaluation of the Indian Youth Leadership Camp by Dr. Mike Charleston (Choctaw) from Pennsylvania State University showed that all students demonstrated increases in self-esteem and

related measures. Those students with potential but who had not shown it, made the greatest gains. This pattern has continued in subsequent studies. As we continue to evaluate programs, we have refined our operating procedures. NIYLP recently published a handbook with practical guidelines for program leaders (Hall, 1991).

We have learned that a key to the success of NIYLP activities is the discussion, or processing, that takes place after the event. The group leader stimulates this process with a series of questions, such as, What happened? Who took the leadership roles? Did everyone listen to all the ideas? Did you work together? This not only develops a positive group process but also teaches higher-level thinking skills, so students may be able to analyze their life experiences and apply relevant knowledge and information.

Successful programs create a safe and structured group environment with clear expectations for student participation in the group process. Except in emergencies, everyone is responsible for group decision making, and all attend group discussions where the rights of each individual are to be respected. Students in conflict learn to talk to each other or the group, not about one another. The group learns to support a person who has a problem and helps resolve conflicts. While ideas may be criticized, persons are not, and no person is forced to speak in a discussion or to be the object of a discussion. All of this takes place within the crucible of community-building, the very real and difficult task of developing bonds of love, respect, trust, and caring. Conrad (1983) captured this process in the world of a young person returning from a multicultural National Leadership conference:

Wow, this is feasible! All races of people can get along, trust each other and be great friends no matter if they're Black, White, Indian, or Mexican American. We must bring this message to others—no matter if it takes 10, 20, 50, or 100 years.

We now have passed the 500th anniversary of the arrival of Europeans as newcomers to this hemisphere. Describing his encounter with those first "Indians," Columbus wrote

that "they exhibited great love toward all others in preference to themselves" (Vogel, 1974). But this generous spirit was not always evident in the relationships of the diverse peoples who would populate the Americas. Perhaps the time is now right for a new generation to reclaim the great values of our respective old-world cultures and build a truly "new world" for all of our children.

The concept of leadership through service is deeply imbedded in the spiritual traditions of both Western and tribal cultures. The model of a servant leader has been passed down in the ancient languages of our people. It is available to a world too often broken by selfishness, exploitation, and domination. The lesson we must teach our young is simply stated in these old Navajo words:

*Yaa joobaa*':

"Having compassion for others above all."

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