



## Waaniniigaanzijig Tribal Youth Council—"The Kids Did Everything"

The Sault St. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians is based in St. Ignace at the southern end of Michigan's Lower Peninsula. About 2,000 of St. Ignace's 3,338 residents are Native Americans. This area, with its forests, rivers and lakes, offers a variety of outdoor activities in every season.

"Waaniniigaanzijig" is an Ojibwe word for "those who lead." The mission of the Waaniniigaanzijig Tribal Youth Council is to "make a difference." The council is one of four youth councils of the Sault Ste. Marie tribe.

Tamara (Tami) Sorensen coordinated youth services for the tribe and was the lead advisor to the Waaniniigaanzijig Youth Council. "We heard about [Celebrate Fitness!](#) at UNITY's national meeting in 2001 and I just jumped on it!"

### Events to Create Fitness

The youth council originally proposed to promote fitness by creating videos and filming tribal elders engaged in traditional outdoor American Indian activities in all four seasons. Instead, the project evolved over time, changing to better reflect the interests of the youth, according to Sorensen. "Youth in our youth council really liked social activities and events, so we ended up doing a lot of those things. And because this focused on physical activity, we had more male participation than we generally get."

"We had a lot of 'ah-ha' moments in this project. One of the biggest was when our youth council co-chair presented the results of our community survey to tribal leaders. People said they wanted a fitness center, and when the youth presented that information to leaders, they created one. This gave the council a lot of confidence."

The Waaniniigaanzijig Youth Council planned and conducted three annual events:

- In 2002 they created Celebrate Fitness! Day. About 250 people participated in basketball, traditional American Indian drumming sessions and other activities. Council members used Celebrate Fitness! Day to survey people about their interests and needs, and to publicize the value of healthy living.

- In 2003 the youth council sponsored a Winter Family Extravaganza that included ice skating, healthy food tasting events and traditional drumming. They also continued to hand out information and survey attendees.
- In 2004 they created a "remote turn-in" week, during which people turned in their television remote controls to the youth council for one week. The goal was to make it harder for people to sit down to watch television and easier for them to do something active.

These activities paid off. "During the third year, we had a turning point. There was a talking circle of youth and they just spontaneously started talking about family members with diabetes, heart problems and other health-related conditions. Sharing their personal stories inspired them to launch into action."

Looking back on Celebrate Fitness! Sorenson says, "The kids did everything. They developed three public service announcements about health and fitness. This project not only gave the kids confidence in themselves, it also helped some of the girls develop more comfort with their bodies and become more active. And the tribe became so proud of these kids."