



Celebrate Fitness!

Promoting Active Living Through Tribal Youth Councils

SUMMARY

From 2001 to 2005, staff at [United National Indian Tribal Youth \(UNITY\)](#) and members of nine Indian youth councils designed and implemented Celebrate Fitness! a youth-led program of activities aimed at promoting healthy lifestyles among Native Americans.

Building on Celebrate Fitness! UNITY implemented Celebrate Native Health from 2005 to 2009. In that project, 13 youth councils promoted changes that lower barriers to healthy eating and physical activity, thereby reducing childhood obesity at community and tribal levels. The initiative tested the notion that youth-led advocacy can advance wellness in communities, especially those with hard-to-reach populations.

UNITY, a nonprofit organization based in Oklahoma City, includes some 200 youth councils in 34 states that promote personal development, citizenship and leadership among Native Americans aged 15 to 24.

Lawrence D. Brown, PhD, a health researcher and professor at Columbia University, conducted a qualitative assessment of Celebrate Fitness! from 2002 to 2005. Evaluators from the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center assessed Celebrate Native Health during its last six months.

Key Findings, Celebrate Fitness!

In his evaluation, Brown found that:

- Six youth councils planned and implemented Celebrate Fitness! initiatives. For examples, see *Dreams Do Come True* and *The Kids Did Everything*.
- Celebrate Fitness! projects faced a number of challenges, including time pressures on participants, limited transportation and difficulties engaging tribal leaders, parents and volunteers.
- Celebrate Fitness! developed leadership and management skills among American Indian youth, and helped them gain respect in their communities.
- Putting money directly in the hands of youth councils sent a message of support and encouragement that this population of young people does not often receive.

Key Findings, Celebrate Native Health

In their report, the University of Oklahoma evaluators found that:

- Youth-led initiatives can spur policy changes that lower barriers to physical activity and healthy eating and increase awareness of healthy lifestyles.
- Many participants derived satisfaction and self-esteem from their ability to implement their plans and achieve healthier lifestyles.
- Many youth councils lacked the technology to communicate with and learn from each other.
- Many participants did not fully understand that the overarching goal of Celebrate Native Health was to change policy, not the behavior of individuals.

Funding

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) provided six grants totaling \$722,840 for Celebrate Fitness! and its evaluation. RWJF supported Celebrate Native Health with a \$55,000 planning grant and a \$1.82 million implementation grant.

CONTEXT

According to the [National Indian Health Board](#), a nonprofit organization that works to improve health care for Native Americans:

- Average life expectancy of Native Americans is 70.6 years—six years less than that of the overall U.S. population.
- High rates of cardiovascular disease and diabetes reflect, at least in part, high rates of obesity, inactivity, alcohol abuse and smoking among Native Americans.
- Almost 40 percent of Native American youths are obese, compared with 20 percent of American youths overall.
- Rates of type 2 diabetes among Native American youth during elementary school years are rising.

Incorporated in 1976, [UNITY](#), a nonprofit organization based in Oklahoma City, includes some 200 youth councils in 34 states. Through the youth councils, Native Americans aged 15 to 24 plan and pursue activities that focus on cultural heritage, environmental concerns, healthy lifestyles and community service and promote personal development, citizenship and leadership.

RWJF Strategy

RWJF has funded two programs addressing the health of Native Americans. The first, *Improving the Health of Native Americans* ran from August 1988 to May 1994. The \$6 million program encouraged creative and culturally unique proposals from tribes and community organizations who wanted to start projects to address the major health problems of American Indians and Alaska Natives.

The second, *Healthy Nations: Reducing Substance Abuse Among Native Americans*, an RWJF national program that ran from 1992 to 2002, helped Native Americans and Alaska Natives find ways to address substance abuse in their communities; see [Program Results Report](#) for more information. Some of the projects developed through that initiative had health and wellness components, such as a Cherokee Nation project that promoted fitness to combat substance abuse. (See [Program Results Report](#) on ID# 028250.)

RWJF otherwise had limited investments in programs serving Native Americans, and had not invested directly in American Indian youth. With the Celebrate Fitness! and Celebrate Native Health initiatives, "we had a nice opportunity to invest not only in Indian country but also in youth," said Jamie Bussel, MPH, RWJF program officer for Celebrating Native Health.

THE PROJECT

Celebrate Fitness!

Celebrate Fitness! aimed to improve the health of Native Americans and their communities by increasing levels of physical activity, improving eating habits and raising awareness of healthy lifestyles and behaviors. The project also aimed to promote leadership skills among Native American youth.

With funds from RWJF¹, UNITY invited youth councils to apply for grants of \$20,000 per year, for up to two years, to develop and run local Celebrate Fitness! programs. Nine youth councils submitted proposals, and project leaders funded all of them by December 2001. (See [Appendix 1](#) for a list of funded youth councils.)

Under contract from RWJF (ID# 043473), Else Henry, MPH, provided additional technical assistance and training to UNITY grantees, and served as a liaison between them and RWJF.

¹ ID#s 035893, 044072, 044108

Celebrate Native Health

In June 2005, UNITY used additional RWJF funds to plan a new initiative, Celebrate Native Health: Youth-Led Advocacy to Promote Nutrition and Physical Activity Among Native American Communities (ID# 052912). UNITY then pursued this initiative with RWJF funding from 2005 to 2009 (ID# 053333).

Celebrate Native Health was designed to expand on Celebrate Fitness! by spurring youth councils to promote changes that foster healthy eating and physical activity and reduce childhood obesity in communities and tribes. The initiative tested the notion that youth-led advocacy can advance wellness in communities, especially those with hard-to-reach populations, and aimed to disseminate lessons learned to other youth councils.

"Youth can be incredibly innovative and important partners in enhancing the environment they live in," said RWJF Program Officer Jamie Bussel. "We gave them the fiscal wherewithal to do what they wanted their communities to do."

UNITY invited youth councils to apply for grants of up to \$32,000 over four years. Eighteen youth councils submitted proposals, and 12 were selected. Two additional sites in Alaska participated with additional funding from the Rasmuson Foundation and the First Alaskans Institute. (See [Appendix 2](#) for a list of the 13 youth councils that ultimately participated in this project.)

Challenges to Celebrate Native Health

The call for proposals sent to UNITY-affiliated youth councils stated that "Celebrate Native Health is about youth leadership for community change." However, significant tension developed between UNITY and RWJF over whether the project targeted policy change.

RWJF Program Officer Jamie Bussel believes that the intent of Celebrate Native Health was clear from the outset, and that UNITY failed to understand it despite a continuing and "painful" dialogue. "The point was to use the power of youth to innovate," said Bussel. "Our focus has always been on environmental and policy change."

However, UNITY Executive Director J.R. Cook said UNITY thought that RWJF had shifted its emphasis midstream, and noted "some miscommunication on all ends.... The call for proposals doesn't exactly say this means a focus on policy, and we didn't recognize it as such. But in hindsight, we can understand that when you are talking about making changes in the community, you have to change policy."

Whatever the source of the misunderstanding, the youth councils struggled to comply when urged to design action plans that focused on changing policy. "A lot of the youth

didn't know what policy change is, or what they could conceivably do to effect change in the local and national community," said Cook.

Evaluation

Lawrence D. Brown, PhD, a professor at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health, conducted a qualitative assessment of Celebrate Fitness! (ID #044740). Brown visited seven of the nine youth councils and interviewed leaders of all nine, attended three national UNITY meetings, reviewed a range of project documents and spoke with UNITY staff.

Project staff of Celebrate Native Health subcontracted with researchers at the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center, led by Caley Gregg, MEd, to evaluate the project during its final six months. The evaluators interviewed UNITY staff, surveyed youth council members and advisors and reviewed project proposals, training documents and other written materials.

Eight of the 13 youth councils returned a total of 73 surveys. The majority of responses (50) came from the Nbiish Be Mwi Jwaang Youth Council in Sault St. Marie, Mich. The other seven tribes returned between two and nine surveys apiece. Some 59 percent of respondents were youth council members, and the remainder were advisors.

Other Funding

Funding from the Rasmuson Foundation and the First Alaskans Institute allowed two youth councils in Alaska to participate in the project.

FINDINGS

Celebrate Fitness!

Brown cited the following findings from his evaluation in a report to RWJF:

Six youth councils planned and implemented Celebrate Fitness! initiatives. For examples, see *Dreams Do Come True* and *The Kids Did Everything*.

- **Three youth councils were either unable to implement Celebrate Fitness! projects or were delayed in doing so because of these challenges:**
 - Youth council leaders and site managers often had multiple commitments that prevented them from devoting adequate time to Celebrate Fitness!

- Enlisting effective support among tribal officials, parents and volunteers proved difficult:
 - Faced with many demands for tribal resources, tribal leaders and policy-makers did not always make Celebrate Fitness! a priority.
 - Power is diffuse within some tribes, and tribal governments may have complex hierarchies and distant headquarters. Building cooperation sometimes required navigating historical loyalties and conflicts.
 - Volunteers who were willing to help did not necessarily have the authority to mobilize resources or sustain participation.
- Participation was complicated by a lack of transportation and the scattered location of fitness sites, homes and schools. Youth had to rely on parents, friends or group vans to take them to meetings, events and fitness centers.
- There was significant turnover as youth council leaders left home for college or work and site managers moved on to other jobs.
- **Youth council members developed leadership skills and gained respect in their communities.**
 - Youth council members developed the capacity to handle grants, assess community needs, negotiate agreements, communicate effectively and draft and revise plans as needed.
 - Youth councils won respect for their contributions from tribal elders, other community organizations and central office staff at UNITY.
- **Putting money directly in the hands of youth councils sent a message of support and encouragement that this population of young people does not often receive.** "The grant helped to nourish and solidify capacity and confidence within the youth council organizations," wrote the evaluator.

Celebrate Native Health

Project staff and the evaluators from the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center cited these successes and obstacles from the project:

- **Youth-led initiatives can spur policy changes that lower barriers to physical activity and healthy eating and increase awareness of healthy lifestyles.** See *Healthy Heroes Spread the Word*.
- **Many participants derived satisfaction and self-esteem from their ability to implement their plans and achieve healthier lifestyles.**
- **Celebrating Native Health fostered a sense of community among participants that enabled them to build on each other's experiences.**

- **Many participants did not understand that the overarching goal of Celebrate Native Health was to change policy.** Some youth councils struggled when they tried to focus on policy change, and lost the motivation to create and pursue new goals.
- **Many youth councils lacked the technology to communicate with and learn from each other.**
- **There was a significant lack of communication between several youth council sites and UNITY staff.** Some youth councils did not respond to requests for project updates and budgetary information, and large geographic distances sometimes inhibited the provision of onsite support.

LESSONS LEARNED

Celebrate Fitness!

1. **When youth own a project, they take their obligations to manage funds and show results very seriously.** "The kids were thrilled, excited and empowered to have a budget," said Program Officer Katherine Kraft, PhD. "They valued that the money came to them, and they felt responsible to deliver something." (Project Director, Evaluator, Site Managers Leona Wathagoma and Tamara Sorenson)
2. **Project participants should give priority to activities that produce tangible products.** Concrete results get positive attention, which promotes continued effort. The walking trail in Arizona, for example, is a constant and visible reminder of the youth council's work. (Program Officer Kraft).
3. **Sustained, high-quality project leadership is essential.** High turnover among site managers and youth council leaders sometimes caused delays and disruptions. (Project Director, Evaluator)
4. **Enlarging the team of youth leaders committed to a project improves results.** Celebrate Fitness! specified that at least two youths lead each project, but the most successful projects had larger leadership teams. (Project Director)
5. **Site managers need training to encourage youth to assume leadership roles.** Some site managers were uncomfortable ceding authority to youth leaders, and tended to take the lead themselves. (Project Director)
6. **Native American organizations should compete for foundation and government grants.** "I would tell another tribe, take a risk, look for grants, don't think 'we might not get selected.' This project helped the youth council believe in itself." (Site Manager Wathagoma)

Celebrate Native Health

7. **Clarify project goals at the outset.** Because UNITY did not initially emphasize to the youth councils that their projects should focus on policy change, participants felt they were being asked to shift their emphasis midstream. (Evaluator)
8. **Promoting policy change, even on a small scale, is difficult.** RWJF hoped to spur only modest changes at the local and tribal levels, such as convincing schools to offer healthier meals. Nonetheless, "environmental and policy change is hard work, especially for young people in isolated communities," said Program Officer Jamie Bussel.
9. **Youth can be innovative partners, but working with them is challenging.** Transitions are an inherent part of young people's lives, with the most active youth likely to move on to college or other activities. (Program Officer Bussel)
10. **Effective adult leaders of tribal youth councils are essential.** Youth councils depended heavily on adult advisors, but they typically had other full-time jobs, varying degrees of engagement and high turnover. "If that position had high turnover, or the advisor didn't communicate with us, then those youth councils really struggled," said UNITY Executive Director J.R. Cook.
11. **Hire the evaluation team at the onset of a project.** The evaluation of *Celebrate Native Health* began only six months before the project ended. Involving evaluators earlier would have allowed them to help plan the project and find tools for assessing outcomes. (Evaluator)

AFTERWARD

After the grant ended, three of the tribal youth councils—Anadarko, Nbiish Be Mwi Jwaang, and Shinnecock Indian Nation—continued to work on the projects they started as part of Celebrate Native Health. Nbiish Be Mwi Jwaang, in Sault Ste. Marie, Mich., received the 2010 Youth Leadership Award from the National Indian Health Board.

UNITY continues to make healthy communities a priority. For example, the organization devoted a session of its 2010 national conference to fitness and health; distributed the health posters at Native American hospitals, clinics and events; and encouraged youth to participate in an online RWJF survey on healthy eating.

UNITY is seeking additional funding to help youth councils learn to effect policy change in their communities.

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Sidebars

YAVAPAI-APACHE YOUTH COUNCIL—"DREAMS DO COME TRUE"

The Yavapai-Apache Nation is comprised of the Yavapai and Apache tribes, whose 1,785 members live in four communities in Camp Verde, a rural area of central Arizona. About 250 people aged seven to 18 live on tribal lands.

The Yavapai-Apache Youth Council has about 20 members and meets monthly to review current projects and plan new ones. "I try to let them choose what they want to do" notes Leona Wathagoma, who guided the council in its Celebrate Fitness! program. "Some are interested in tribal heritage and culture, and others want to go to church."

The Youth Council applied for funding after learning about the Celebrate Fitness! project at a UNITY meeting. "We did not know whether we would get the grant and it was a moment of great pride for the youth when we did," says Wathagoma.

Building a Walking Trail

Initially, the group wanted to build a trail, but set that project aside because of flooding in the preferred location. They next considered building a fitness center, but decided that was too complex a project, and so returned to the idea of building a trail, this time in another location.

The advantage of the new location was its proximity to tribal headquarters, which made it easy for employees to use it at lunch or before or after work. But that location had other challenges. "It is sacred land and the youth council had to get approval from tribal leaders to use it for a trail," explained Wathagoma. "When they got that approval, it was another moment of great pride."

After receiving approval to use the land, youth council members moved quickly to complete the project. They hired someone to survey the land and draw sketches of the proposed trail, and then hired a contractor to build it.

"We decided to dedicate the trail to Billy Smith, a deceased tribal elder who never owned a car and who was known for walking all over Camp Verde," said Wathagoma. The Billy Smith Trail is about one-quarter mile around, with both hilly and flat areas. One section is handicapped-accessible. "When we got the grant, we were told the project had to include the whole community, so we made sure that everyone, including handicapped people, could use it."

After the trail opened, the youth council created public service announcements and sponsored health events on the trail, and nearby, to promote its use.

"Aside from the walking trail itself, the biggest thing we got from Celebrate Fitness! is pride. Our youth council felt a sense of pride when they were selected to participate in Celebrate Fitness! Then they felt pride when the tribal elders gave them the land. And they felt a great sense of pride when the trail opened and people started using it.

"My advice to others: Dreams do come true. Don't think 'we won't be picked' because you might be."

WAANINIIGAANZIJJIG 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."

ANADARKO UNITY YOUTH COUNCIL—"HEALTHY HEROES SPREAD THE WORD"

A life-size head of lettuce? A dancing ear of corn? A talking apple? Those are some of the Oklahoma-based Healthy Heroes who are performing for elementary schoolchildren and at tribal events to spread the word on the importance of good nutrition.

Healthy Heroes is the Celebrate Fitness! project designed by the Anadarko UNITY Youth Council. Launched in 2006, the youth council is housed in the Indian Education Department of the Anadarko Public Schools. The surrounding region is home to seven Native American tribes, and 80 percent of the student population is of Native origin.

After receiving a Celebrate Native Health grant, the youth council faced the daunting task of designing a project. The young people took the lead on the planning from the beginning. "The whole purpose was that the kids should be the ones to develop this," said David Sullivan, adult advisor to the youth council. "Our job was to help facilitate, pull out their ideas, get them to work together."

Trying Out Different Ideas

Council participants initially considered holding an Indian Olympics, but an ongoing effort to promote physical activity seemed more desirable than a one-time event. Another idea was to videotape messages on healthy living, but encouraging more "screen time" among local residents didn't seem like the best approach.

Finally, one student suggested a performance built around "big vegetable" characters, and Healthy Heroes was born. "We decided to target younger kids to promote wellness early, so hopefully these habits would become ingrained," Sullivan explained.

The youth wrote the script, chose the music and dance steps, and used grant funds to purchase four costumes, although they later designed their own costumes. After many hours of practice, the dedicated troupe felt ready to appear at local elementary schools, and did so 16 times over the next two years.

Healthy Heroes Moves on Out

Other invitations began coming in. The Healthy Heroes were asked to appear at a Health Day rally in the state capitol building in Oklahoma City, at Honor the Child Day in Wichita, Kan., and at the National Indian Education Conference. After performing at UNITY conferences, "the kids had a bit of a celebrity status. If you were a Healthy Hero, you were popular," said Sullivan.

As many as 50 young people aged 14 to 23 put on the show at any given time, some dancing in costume, others staging the event and still others holding signs with health messages or talking to the audience.

The performers also created a 30-second public service TV announcement that aired on the local CBS affiliate for a year. On that spot, Healthy Heroes talked about healthy eating and physical activity, presented bleak statistics on diabetes among American Indians and, in a final shot, pulled sedentary kids off their couches and danced with them down an alleyway.

Sullivan viewed Celebrate Native Health's emphasis on policy change as consistent with the youth council's other activities. "The policy that we changed was the number of hours per school day that students are exposed to health messages and healthy activities. We wanted to create exposure beyond physical education classes. The approach fit right in."

APPENDIX 1

Youth Councils Participating in Celebrate Fitness!

(Current as of the time of the grant; provided by the grantee organization; not verified by RWJF.)

Akimel O'odham/Pee Posh Youth Council

Gila River Indian Community
Sacaton, Ariz.

Waaniniigaanzijig Tribal Youth Council

Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians
St. Ignace, Mich.

Dine UNITY Council of Kaibeto

Kaibeto Chapter House
Kaibeto, Ariz.
(Initial grantee: Page High School UNITY
Club)

Linkin Native Youth

(initially called Creating A Personal Vision
Youth Council)
Indian Center, Inc.
Lincoln, Neb.

Yavapai-Apache Youth Council

Yavapai-Apache Tribe
Camp Verde, Ariz.

**To'hajillee Warrior SpearStaff Youth
Council**

To'hajillee Community School
Canoncito, N.M.

Tule River Youth Council

Tule River Tribe
Porterville, Calif.

Chickasaw Nation District Youth Council

Chickasaw Nation of Oklahoma
Ada, Okla.

Rising Sun Youth Group

Choctaw Apache Community of Ebarb, Inc.
Zwolle, La.

APPENDIX 2

Youth Councils Participating in Celebrate Native Health

The Beat Goes On UNITY Youth Council

Traditional Council of Togiak
Togiak, Alaska

**Tohono O'Odham Nation UNITY Youth
Council**

Tohono O'Odham Tribe
Sells, Ariz.

**Leaders of Tomorrow UNITY Youth
Council**

Cook Inlet Tribal Council
Anchorage, Alaska

**Nbiish Be Mwi Jwaang UNITY Youth
Council**

Sault Ste Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians
Sault Ste Marie, Mich.

**Gwichyaa Zhee Gwich'in Tribal Youth
Council**

Gwichyaa Zhee Gwich'in Tribal Council
Fort Yukon, Alaska

Maawanji Idiwag UNITY Youth Council

Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa & Chippewa
Indians
Suttons Bay, Mich.

Great Falls All Nations UNITY Youth Council

Great Falls Public Schools
Great Falls, Mt.

Jicarilla Apache UNITY Youth Council

Jicarilla Apache
Dulce, N.M.

Shinnecock Nation UNITY Youth Council

Shinnecock Nation
Southampton, N.Y.

Anadarko UNITY Youth Council

Anadarko Public Schools Indian Education
Department
Anadarko, Okla.

Cheyenne-Arapaho UNITY Youth Council

Cheyenne-Arapaho Tribes
Concho, Okla.

Kickapoo UNITY Council

Kickapoo Tribe
McLoud, Okla.

Bad River UNITY Youth Council

Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa
Indians
Odanah, Wis.

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(Current as of date of the report; as provided by the grantee organization; not verified by RWJF; items not available from RWJF.)

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