

# NORTHWEST INDIAN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT CENTER



## All About What's Not Broken

STORY BY  
**Marcie Rendon**

The Northwest Indian Community Development Center (NWICDC) is a Native-led community organization that promotes wellness and equity for American Indian families. Its comprehensive, culturally specific and community-led services are all built from the Anishinaabe worldview.

**“When resourcefulness is  
balanced with abundance,  
there is always more.”**

**Tuleah Palmer**  
Northwest Indian Community Development Center



**YEARS ACTIVE**  
Founded in 1989

**GEOGRAPHY**  
Minnesota / Native nations

**BUDGET**  
\$1M – \$4,999,999

**LEADER**  
Tuleah Palmer

# INNOVATION

## NORTHWEST INDIAN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT CENTER

NWICDC is building an ecosystem of support and healing from a shared Indigenous framework, alongside social enterprises that provide innovative solutions and diverse sources of revenue.

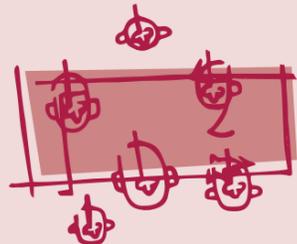
### Breakthrough

In response to a drop in funding in 2011, NWICDC shifted to a cultural model of operation, with respectful community engagement, listening and learning at the center. NWICDC draws on spiritual leaders, community members and staff to shape a model rooted in protecting the values by which the Ojibwe and the Dakota lived before the age of Western oppression.



#### Embracing the Teachings

A meeting with community elders led to an organizational shift to an Anishinaabe cultural value system — one based on listening and deep collaboration between programs, agencies and external program partners.



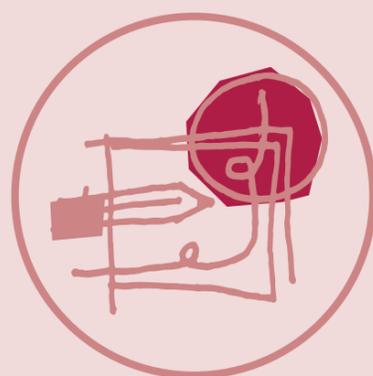
#### Living the Practice

NWICDC's Aazhoomon Collaborative — Mewinzha Ondaadiziike Wiigaming, the Miikanan Gallery, the Anokiiwin program and the Ombishkwe program — all serve different segments of the community but share a common vision.

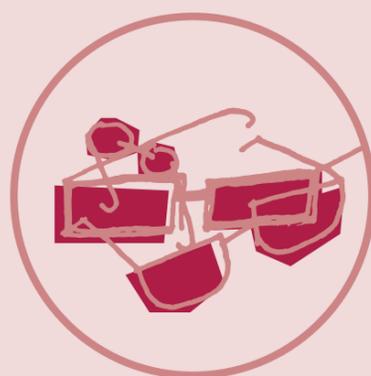


#### A Shared Direction

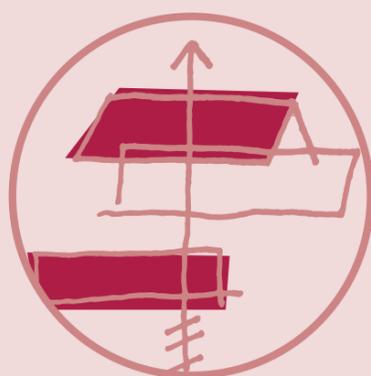
NWICDC builds partnerships with non-Anishinaabe agencies, promoting growth and health across all communities. This coordinated approach has improved the fortunes of many Native nonprofits in the region.



RESOURCEFUL



SHARED VISION



CONTINUE THROUGH SETBACKS

“Racism” is not the first word people want to read.

Yet racism was the propellant for change at the Northwest Indian Community Development Center (NWICDC). In 2012, after 35 years of seeing no change in the local employment statistics for American Indians, NWICDC offered tobacco to enlist the wisdom of six elders. Tobacco, sacred to Native people, is often given when requesting wisdom or prayers from elders or spiritual leaders. The recipient will then offer the tobacco to the spirits for guidance before speaking. In this way, the traditions of old are honored, and the speakers will know they are speaking from their hearts, not their egos.

“[The elders] told us how to make it better,” says Joe Day, co-founder and current board chair of NWICDC. “They said, ‘We [American Indians] are not looked at as human beings. We are looked at as a source of money for schools, jails, local businesses.’ They told us we need to be

proud of who we are as Ojibwe. We need to not behave like white people expect us to behave but behave as our ancestors taught us.”

The genesis for change began in 1984 at meetings on the Leech Lake Reservation in northern Minnesota. Leaders of several U.S. State Department agencies — the Department of Natural Resources, the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Transportation, among others — were meeting with the Red Lake, Leech Lake and White Earth bands of Ojibwe to coordinate plans around new infrastructure development. “If we were going to build a new school, we could let the transportation department know what routes were needed,” says Joe.

At one such meeting, the Leech Lake tribal chairman asked why the city of Bemidji didn’t hire Indians for these infrastructure projects. An answer wasn’t forthcoming, so the tribes and local agencies put together a research project.

**“We need to not behave like white people expect us to behave but behave as our ancestors taught us.”**

Joe Day

Northwest Indian Community Development Center

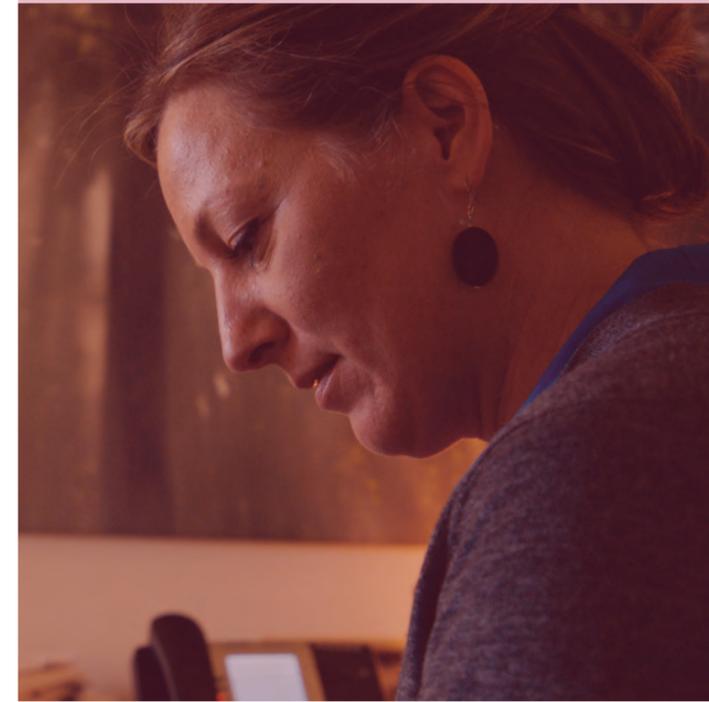
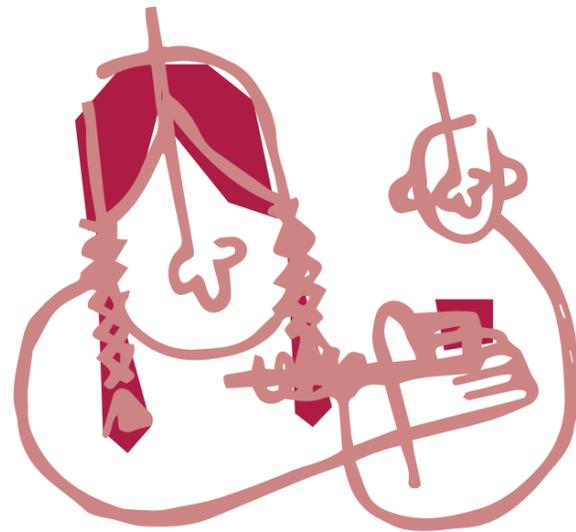
It took a year to develop a survey and another year to interview Bemidji employers and employees. The 1987 results weren't a surprise to tribal leaders — the study revealed a pattern of racial bias. "Racism was the bottom line as to why Indians weren't hired," says Joe. "It took us two years to validate what we already knew."

At the recommendation of then-Governor Rudy Perpich, NWICDC became part of the national American Indian Opportunities Industrialization Center (AIOIC) job training program. NWICDC focused on job training for about 20 years, but the employment rate remained static. Then, in 2012, the U.S. government zeroed out all monies for AIOIC programs nationwide. NWICDC was at a turning point. It had to examine what it was doing, and its staff asked themselves, "Can we improve? Who can give us advice?"

# EMBRACING THE TEACHINGS

At that turning point in 2012, with no budget for advertising, Tuleah Palmer, NWICDC executive director, had her staff spread the word of a cultural evening that would bring together the community to help NWICDC chart a new future.

Over 80 people attended, showing Tuleah and her team just how much the community was looking to honor its cultural traditions during this time of transition.



Tuleah Palmer

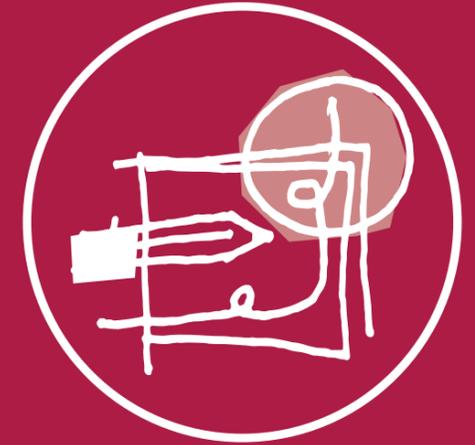


Bemidji, Minnesota

CHARACTERISTIC

NO

1



RESOURCEFUL

**WHAT ASPECTS OF "NATIVE RESOURCEFULNESS" CAN OTHER NATIVE AND NON-NATIVE ORGANIZATIONS LEARN AND BENEFIT FROM?**

"It is important to never chase money. Chase ethics and alignment. Our most important resource is our community and trust. We look at what is working in our community and build on that, rather than accepting a dominant narrative of 'how it should be.' The most critical resource in any community is its people. We look into community and see amazing people who are leaders doing healing work. We visit those people and ask them to get involved. We do not compromise our values, and that includes philanthropy. Trust is invaluable."

**Tuleah Palmer**

Northwest Indian Community  
Development Center

“We knew that job training is one tiny sliver of what we need to do. Now we attempt to address the whole gamut of what affects people’s lives.”

**Joe Day**

Northwest Indian Community Development Center

“Using the age-old protocol of tobacco offerings, we asked the elders to teach us about the old ways,” says Joe. “The elders told us, ‘Conduct yourself according to the seven teachings of the Anishinaabe.’”

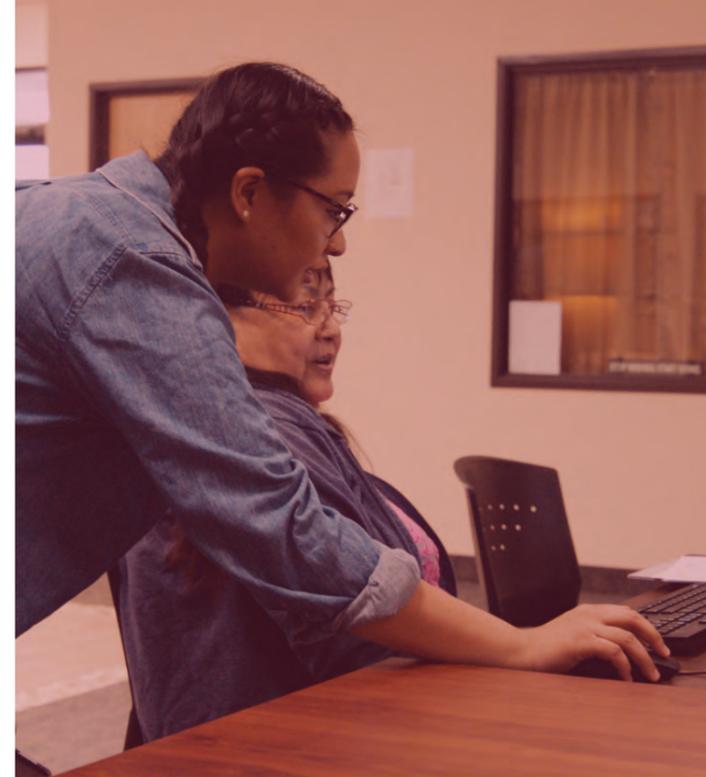
Says Joe, “We knew that job training is one tiny sliver of what we need to do. Now we attempt to address the whole gamut of what affects people’s lives and ask, ‘How can we help meet all these needs in a good way?’”

NWICDC staff encouraged those in attendance to share their vision of the kinds of programming that would work for them. That evening was just the beginning. A door opened, and a path was created for how to move forward.

The name Anishinaabe means “to be human.” Based on the wisdom of the six Dakota and Ojibwe elders, NWICDC is

actualizing for participants what it means to be Anishinaabe. The Anishinaabe values of kindness, love, respect, bravery and honesty are central to NWICDC, and its indigenized services promote healing and racial equity for individuals and for surrounding tribal nations.

That meeting with elders led to a pivot for NWICDC — a transformation into an organization that exists firmly within the Anishinaabe cultural value system. Today, the NWICDC Aazhoomon Collective builds on an ecosystem of support and healing from a shared Indigenous framework. In that collaborative are Mewinzha Ondaadiziike Wiigaming, the Miikanan Gallery, the Anokiiwin program and the Ombishkwe program. All services are carried out within the Anishinaabe concept of Mino-bimaadiziwin — living a good life.



NWICDC Offices



Bemidji, Minnesota

CHARACTERISTIC  
No  
2



SHARED VISION

**HOW CAN ORGANIZATIONS THAT MANAGE MULTIPLE PROGRAMS MAKE SURE EVERYONE IS OPERATING TOWARD A COMMON GOAL?**

“This is a constant tension being in a decolonizing mindset. It does take money to pay the light bill. How do we accept resources without becoming the same system we are working away from? It takes constant attention, ongoing conversations, adaptability and being comfortable with tension. Orientation to the work is essential, but that begins in interviews and conversations with incoming people too. Making sure that the right people are in positions that naturally align with personal strengths and gifts is essential to broader alignment.”

**Tuleah Palmer**

Northwest Indian Community Development Center

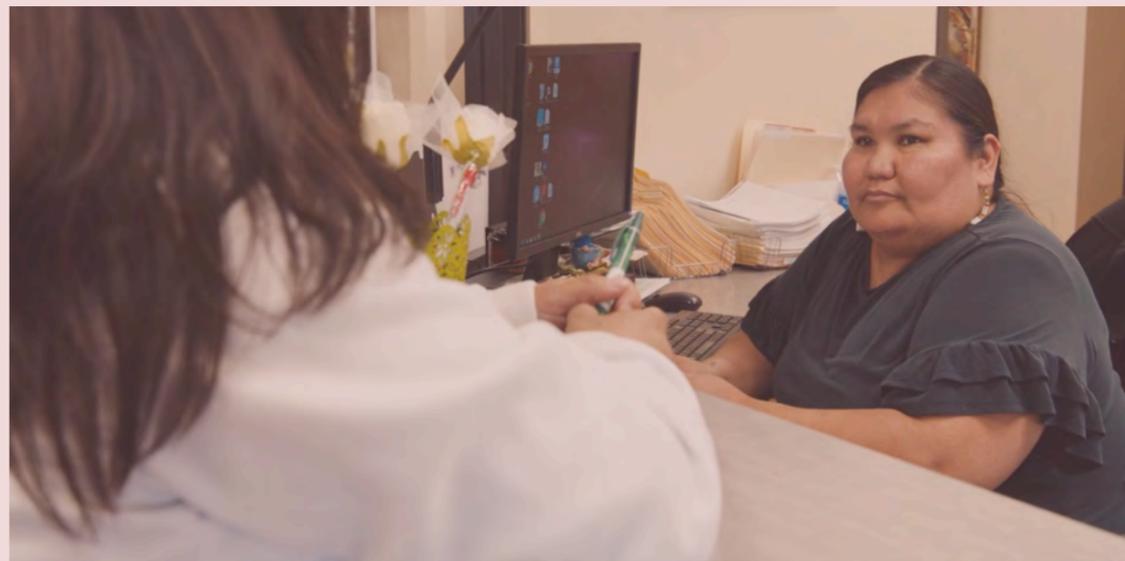
“The number one thing we have here is trust.”

**Tuleah Palmer**

Northwest Indian Community Development Center

What is a good life? In Mino-bimaadiziwin, it is listening well to all peoples. It is the collaboration among programs, agencies and outside program entities. It is the resourcefulness of Nativeness that pulls all things together to create a whole. At the NWICDC building, it is the beautiful Native American art on the walls. It is the brand-new stylish furniture that welcomes visitors to sit in a beautiful, comfortable place. Mino-bimaadiziwin is all about what is not broken in the true nature of the Anishinaabe people.

Tuleah says, “We have always been resourceful people. We determined that when resourcefulness is balanced with abundance, there is always more. Now we, NWICDC, always err on the side of abundance, err on the side of generosity. The number one thing we have here is trust — we trust ourselves, each other, the creator.”



NWICDC Offices

# LIVING THE PRACTICE

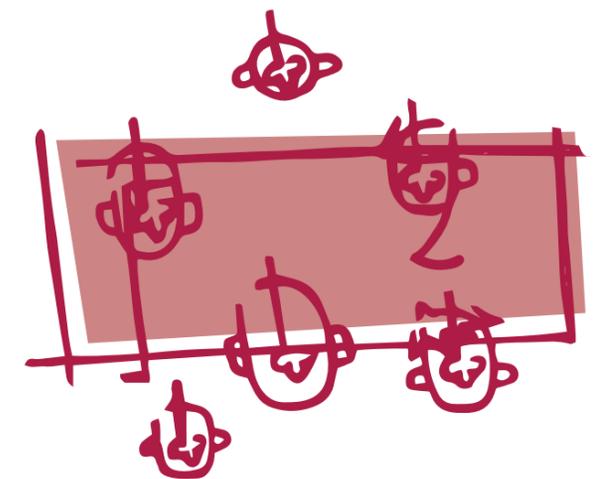
INNOVATION  
STORY Nº 5  
NORTHWEST  
INDIAN COMMUNITY  
DEVELOPMENT CENTER

Living a good life means honoring the phases of life that touch all of us — birth, growth, expression, change.

NWICDC serves everyone, from infants to elders, within a culturally based framework and with a fierce commitment to honoring the culture and values of community.

A good life means having community support to bring new life into the world. Millicent Simenson, a trained doula, heads the Mewinzha Ondaadiziike Wiigaming program, which works within that cultural framework to meet the needs of teen moms. Since its launch in 2014, the program has provided trained birth and postpartum doulas to mothers. “Millicent helped me create my birth plan,” says Tara Rasmussen, a young mom who benefited from the doula program.

Millicent listened to Tara’s needs and then gathered the resources to make her birth the birth she wanted and helped her access culturally specific parenting classes. “Our women are not necessarily going to relate to physiology,” Millicent says.



# “They talk about allowing women to know personal sovereignty.”

**Millicent Simenson**

Northwest Indian Community Development Center

“Elders talk to the women about the trauma their families have faced and how it affects their relationships. They talk about allowing women to know personal sovereignty. It always comes down to your rights, your birthright as a woman.”

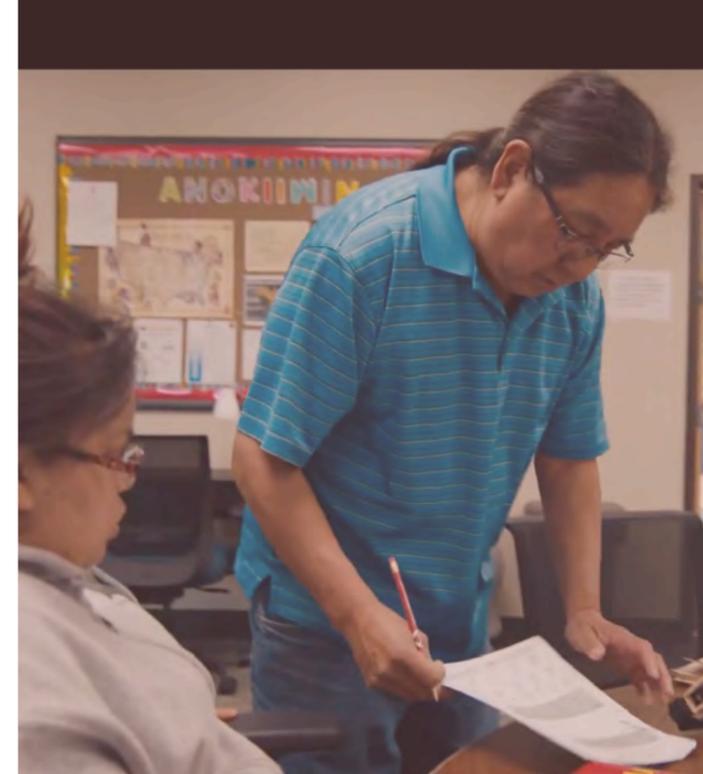
That understanding led to a successful birth experience for Tara: “It had everything I wanted — no immunizations, no eye drops, no bath, no bottle. Millie’s knowledge made me feel so much better.”

A good life means having space to express yourself creatively and grow into your potential. The Miikanan Gallery, located within the Watermark Gallery in Bemidji, exhibits and promotes Indigenous art in the region. In formal and informal talking circles, women create art, share knowledge and are accepted for who they are. The Anokiiwin education and workforce programs help people apply to college or get their GEDs or training certification for better jobs. The programs help with transportation, work clothes and uniforms.

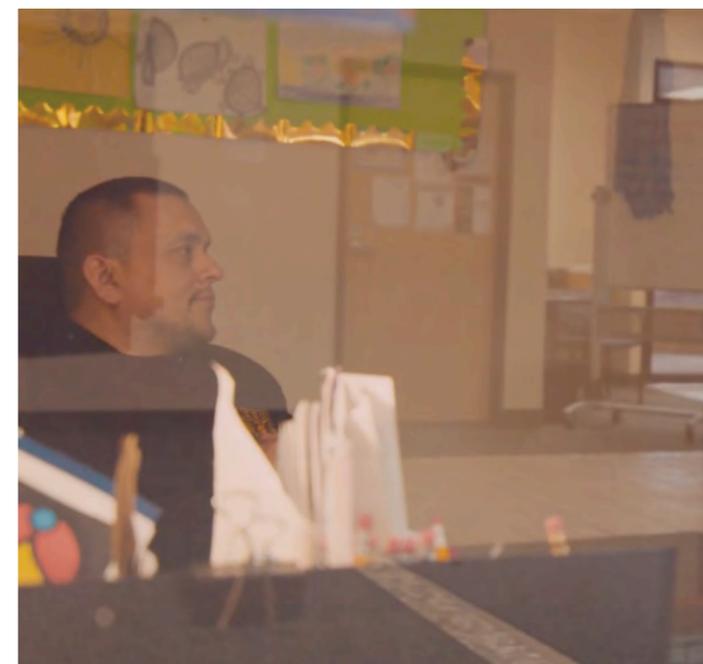
A good life means having resources to make a change in that life. The basement area of NWICDC’s building is a men’s-only

space. At a two-day summit several years ago, the NWICDC team listened to men’s stories. “We heard from the men what they are looking for to become better human beings,” says Tuleah. “We took all that data and developed a program based on what they told us they need — safe space, food and a cultural mentor.”

Those needs served as the foundation for the Ombishkwe program, which focuses on reintegration of people — mostly men — who are transitioning from the criminal justice system into the community. NWICDC organized meetings with the mental health providers of the area tribes; they demanded a meeting with the Beltrami County Department of Human Services (DHS), which led to the county administrator giving NWICDC funding for the program. The need was clear: tribes asked that NWICDC monitor incarceration and release processes so tribal members could be aware of tribal agencies and resources available to them. Ombishkwe staff listen to requests for services and then help each program participant access the programs that best serve their needs.



NWICDC Offices

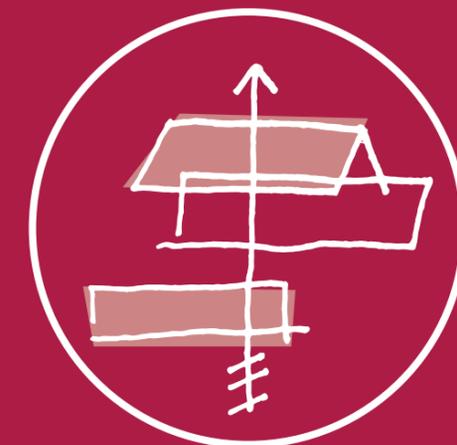


NWICDC Offices

CHARACTERISTIC

NO

3



CONTINUE THROUGH SETBACKS

**HOW CAN ORGANIZATIONS STAY DRIVEN AND FOCUSED ON THEIR GOALS, EVEN DURING BIG CHANGES IN FUNDING LEVELS?**

“Fundamentally, you have to love your community and love what you do and believe in it. You have to be willing to sacrifice time and maybe even income, but you cannot compromise values or ethics. We worked with a deficit financially but never wavered on our love or our commitment. While we are a larger organization now, there was a time when we were also paying for the toilet paper and coffee from our own pockets. Our community is incredibly resourceful; it is a huge asset that is underappreciated and unvalued in a capitalist system. I love that we said no to funders because we knew we were being used to fit quota. Those stories are just as powerful to our narrative, if not more than the Bush Prize.”

**Tuleah Palmer**

Northwest Indian Community Development Center

# A SHARED DIRECTION



Healing-Centered Space



NWICDC Offices

“We create a space for men to be heard,” says Kenneth Thompson, one of the facilitators in the men’s program. “When men come here, they need housing, they need reinstatement of driver’s licenses. Every apartment building in Beltrami County is owned by six men who won’t rent to felons. All HUD [tribal] housing won’t rent to convicted felons. With a high incarceration rate, none of the reservations are doing anything to put forth resources to help with housing for tribal members who have a record. We asked ourselves, ‘What can we do differently?’”

The difference, yet again, was a bigger focus on cultural practice. “If we bring back the ceremonies,” Kenneth says, “we bring men together to start the healing process, and we get back to what will work. Maybe not one of us will know how to heal, but if we gather a hundred, we can figure it out.”

“Maybe not one of us will  
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figure it out.”

**Kenneth Thompson**

Northwest Indian Community Development Center

A good life is one you can share and one that can be shared with you.

All NWICDC programs operate with a spirit of sharing. According to Tuleah and Joe, Native nonprofits in the region are doing better because NWICDC is helping pull efforts together to focus on a coordinated approach. “We believe in sharing resources. The collective approach is stronger than just one organization. In our model we share, we lift when we can, nudge when we can,” says Tuleah.

NWICDC also works with and educates non-Anishinaabe agencies to promote growth and health for all communities. NWICDC has advocated for DHS to intervene when Minnesota Family Investment Program statutes were not being adhered to. Staff looked at state law and statutes and noted a discrepancy in how public funding was supposed to be deployed and identified that the county was violating statutes. NWICDC filed complaints to DHS. “We had to study federal law to understand state law to understand tribal application of those laws,” says Tuleah. She is always consulting with the board, the staff and tribal organizations when issues arise.

There’s even sharing in the way NWICDC serves its members. Case management relies on a shared file system for members and care coordinators, so all involved are



“We need to get everyone pointed in the same direction. Like a fleet of canoes.”

Joe Day

Northwest Indian Community Development Center

on the same page for service delivery. As a membership organization, all individuals complete a membership form so the agency and its partners can track who is being served and how.

Within the membership framework, all services are tiered. Participants can choose to just do ceremonial events or get their GED or do both. NWICDC makes sure everyone knows that information about cultural teachings and educational or job opportunities is available to them. In this way NWICDC maintains a large community database at the same time it maintains

a comprehensive list of all services in all three local tribes. It is then possible to promote referrals within the tribes for appropriate services for individuals. These tribes share their resource list with others and prioritize their workforce list based on the needs from the original referral sheet.

“We are starting to build some efficacy in the reservation communities,” Joe adds. “We need to get away from colonized thinking. Today we have reservations, but before colonization it was groups of Indians working with groups of other Indians.”



Chief Bemidji Statue



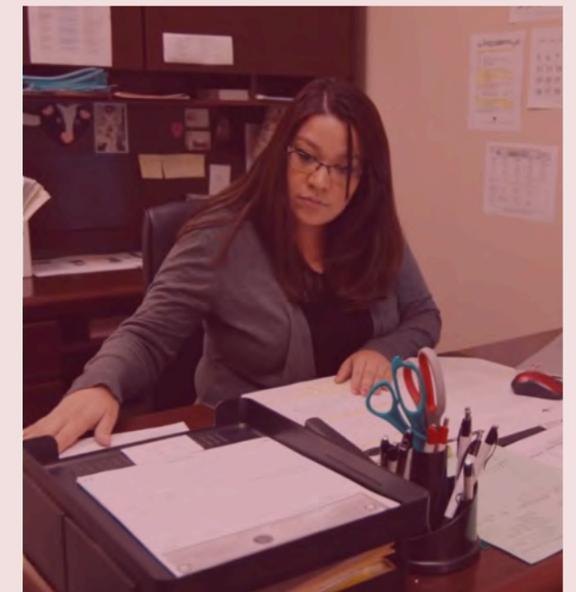
Healing Spaces for Men



Drum Circle



Community Board



NWICDC Offices