

Namadji Youth and Elders Project Report

*A Project Funded by
The Two Feathers Fund*
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*“These days all the elders are passing on and when they’re gone, there’s nothing left if we don’t learn our language and culture. It’s very important for us to do this” --
Eric Wolf, 17 year old American Indian youth*

Executive Summary

This report was written with the cooperation of several elders in the St. Paul American Indian community and several Indian youth from a local youth organization. In addition, several local Indian organizations collaborated with the American Indian Policy Center to make this small project possible, Ain dah Yung Shelter, Juel Fairbanks Drop-in Center, American Indian Family Center and the Elders Lodge.

The Anishinabe people, in their language, have a word as powerful and equally significant as “love.” The word is “*Namadji*,” and in English it roughly translates to mean “honor, dignity, and respect”. In Anishinabe culture, once you have honor, dignity, and respect, not only for everything around you, but also for yourself, then you can truly experience love.

*Love is the first thing. You get respect out of that. It takes two or three years to learn to love everything, even your god. Out of that, you get respect That is what I was told. You love everything.
Even my maker. Mdewewin – that is what I am.
--- Albert Hendricks, 67 year old Indian elder*

The *Namadji Project* was initiated and arose from comments made by Indian elders over time and in talking circles at public forums sponsored by the American Indian Policy Center. Based on these comments it was reasoned that the American Indian community must begin to address the growing distance between its young and the elderly. Historically and culturally, communication between young people and elders was essential and significant for the preserva-

tion of the people and their culture. The Indian cultural values and beliefs were unwritten and instead retained through oral means. Passing down information from one generation to the next helped retain the legends and customs on which American Indians based their worldview.

Indian people survived, despite persistent attempts to assimilate them into the “melting pot” of America, by virtue of clinging to their culture. The U.S. government and Christian boarding schools, the military and even the Bureau of Indian Affairs sponsored attempts to promote those assimilation attempts. In each instance, a reoccurring theme arose: knowledge and the preservation of culture is vitally important to Indians. The culture defines who they are and in essence manifests their “sacred history.” That history is based on values and beliefs that are rooted in the spiritual context and cannot be separated from other parts of an Indian’s life. In contemporary society, a syndrome of “separation of church and state” is desired, while in Indian ways the totality of life is appreciated by knowing that everything has life and everything is interconnected.

All things are connected like the blood that unites us. We did not weave the web of life; we are merely a strand in it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves.

Chief Seattle.

Today, American Indians who have a good understanding of their culture use it as a strengthening asset to help meet the challenges of poverty and social and political disenfranchisement. An Indian with a good grasp about his or her culture is often more successful at working through life’s problems. Yet, knowledge about one’s culture is often trivialized in today’s high-tech, informational society. It follows then, that if the culture of Indians is made less important it will weaken and will break down. This will more than likely happen if Indian children continue to grow apart from their elders. Sadly, Indian people themselves are now unwittingly perpetuating this situation. The transfer of information between generations no longer thrives as it once did. If this trend continues the culture will suffer and eventually be lost.

The Namadji Project is a beginning to a longer and more in depth analysis of this problem. It first demonstrates that a generation gap does exist between American Indian elders and youth in the local urban context of St. Paul. It further demonstrates that no significant, viable response is in place to engage this dilemma. Further examination of this phenomenon is neces-

sary so that steps might be developed to capture the fading information and wisdom possessed by the elders.

The Ain dah Yung youth shelter, the Elders Lodge, the Juel Fairbanks Drop-In Center, and the American Indian Family Center, all located in St. Paul, deserve our acknowledgement for their firm support and help in developing this project. We express to them our sincere gratitude for their gracious support, encouragement and involvement. Without them this project would not have been possible. The Two Feathers Fund is acknowledged for their keen community and cultural perspective in supporting projects such as Namadji.

The Project

The American Indian Policy Center developed the “Namadji Youth and Elders Project” because we felt a need to examine the “disconnect” between traditional Indian elders and youth, especially those living in contemporary urban society. Based on information from our past projects in the Indian community we were made aware that American Indian elders were not involved in policy and program development affecting the Indian community. In addition, Indian youth have had less exposure to their elders for learning purposes.

Indian elders and youth have fewer interactions in today’s society than in Indian communities of the past. Without these intergenerational relationships, a key mode of transmitting cultural knowledge, values, and Indian worldview is disrupted. This project attempts to focus and elaborate on this disruption by asking youth and elders what is being passed down from generation to generation, by soliciting their views on how they see Indian identity, and by investigating perceived barriers to youth-elder interaction. The project not only recognizes and describes the “generation gap” between Indian elders and youth, but also aims to demonstrate that perhaps Indian cultural identity as a catalyst might diminish this gap.

The first phase of the project focused on interviewing Indian youth. Two social service agencies that primarily serve the Indian community introduced the interviewer to youth involved with their various programs. These programs involved a group for teens whose lives have been affected by alcohol, a youth leadership program, and a program that provides Indian cultural activities. Six youth, ranging in age from 11 to 17, were interviewed. Interviews were based on a set of questions that were loosely structured. Interviews lasted from thirty minutes to an hour and a half, depending on the individual and his or her interest in discussing the interview topics.

The second phase of the project focused on interviewing Indian elders. Elders were identified through an American Indian-based residential facility for elders, a social service agency serving Indian families, as well as referrals to elders who are recognized community leaders. Interviewed were six elders, ranging in age from 58 to 83, using essentially the same basic questions used in the youth interviews and modified to be age-appropriate. Elder interviews were also loosely structured and conversational, and varied in length depending on the elder’s interest in discussing topics.

The third phase involved a dinner and an informal focus-group type discussion that was intended to bring youth and elders together. The dinner was hosted at an elder residential facility on St. Paul's East Side. Five elders came to the dinner and participated in the discussion, but none of the youth attended. Prior to the occasion, many of the youth expressed interest in attending as well as genuine interest in meeting and talking with elders. It is possible that youth simply weren't interested in this particular occasion to meet elders, or that we failed to provide enough incentive. It is also possible that transportation, time conflicts, work schedules, and other practical issues prevented youth from coming. The failure to bring elders and youth together in common discussion may be an unfortunate demonstration of the generation gap.

The fourth phase, while not originally meant to be included in this project, contain comments obtained from Indian elders at an Indian reservation during a talking circle concerning Indian family preservation. Also, we added comments made by elders during other discussions, talking circles or public forums.

Assumptions were held going into this project, based on earlier projects and life experiences by the president of the Policy Center felt that elders and youth face struggles that pull them in different directions. These assumptions were confirmed and, in fact, augmented with our findings. We reasoned that older Indian people strive to retain traditional values and beliefs; to cope with work, health and financial problems; and in some cases, to simply adjust to their own dislocation from family. Young people may struggle to become successful, well-adjusted adults; to deal with a fast-paced, school and work-oriented culture; and in some cases, to keep their families viable. Both find themselves "caught," so to speak, in mainstream social forces that ascribe very different roles for youth than for elders. Both age groups assign great importance to American Indian values, lifestyle, and language, yet the two groups rarely merge with mutual intent for retaining their culture. Passing down oral traditions and thereby maintaining American Indian culture requires an everyday interaction between youth and elders. Culture has a greater opportunity to thrive when Indian children are immersed in an Indian way of life on an everyday basis. Events staged on an occasional basis are not sufficient to provide children with valuable cultural knowledge much less a strong cultural identity.

It is not simply a matter then, of two groups going separate ways. A key observation is that, on a day-to-day basis, there is little to bring these two groups together, even when they may be seeking similar goals. In fashioning this project and this report, it became increasingly diffi-

cult to delimit the problem we refer to as the “generation gap.” As we learned more about the unique lives of individuals, we discovered more and more questions. It became obvious that the “disconnect” between elders and youth cannot be adequately addressed in isolation from broader problems in urban Indian society.

In addition, contemporary, mainstream, European-based societal attitudes help drive this phenomenon. Leaders of social institutions, most of whom have not learned about the importance of these intrinsic values and beliefs to American Indians, remain unaware. A leader at a local public policy institution, for example, in a discussion with the Center’s president asked, “when are American Indians going to leave the old ways of doing things and join the contemporary world?” This kind of question seems to already behold an expected answer. It shows that this person does not appreciate the knowledge of the traditions held by the elders.

The elders, in those days, we held in great respect. Whatever they told us, we would listen very carefully, trying not to make mistakes when we listened, because we respected them so highly, because they knew so much more than we did . . .

*Mary Muktoyuk
Yupiaq Nation*

Perceptions of the Generation Gap

Unsurprisingly, most American Indian youth and elder interviewees living in St. Paul did not interact with members of other generations on a daily, or even a weekly, basis. However, everyone interviewed had some intergenerational contact. The amount and quality of intergenerational contact varied greatly. But the problem is not simply a matter of elders and youth losing contact; it seems to be a larger problem of entire families breaking apart. Many of the youth interviewed have in some sense, “lost” grandparents, parents, and siblings to various causes: death, unstable housing, correctional facilities, substance abuse, or prior generations of assimilation to mainstream Anglo culture. Many elders described similar events in their families. Some of the youth recognized that they were at a distance from elders and wanted to correct it. But these youth also recognize that they are involved in greater struggles to grow up successfully, make it through school, strengthen their cultural identity, and keep up their responsibilities to their family members. Elders may play a key role in these processes, but seeking elder contact is not the primary concern. Elders also recognize the many different challenges facing youth.

Youth Perspectives

“Most of our parents passed away when we were young and we were left to fend for ourselves. And we’re trying to protect ourselves and our siblings. People just don’t understand that.”

In the above quote, Eric Wolf,¹ a seventeen-year-old boy, illustrates his own experience of the generation gap. The generation gap for him means an overall lack of involvement from adults. Eric talked about his own and his brother’s struggles to make it on their own. About youth in general, he says, “We ain’t lost. We just need extra support from adults.”

Misty Ronin, who is also seventeen, talked about her family’s struggles to find housing and stay together. While this certainly contributed to her lack of intergenerational contact, in her case, the generation gap means something else as well.

“Of my whole family, I’m the one who knows the most about our native culture. Because when my mom was growing up, even though she was Indian and her mom was a full-blooded Indian too,

¹ All names in this report are pseudonyms to protect the privacy of those interviewed.

her mom and all her brothers and sisters grew up in the Christian world. She didn't know nothing about her culture."

The transmission of American Indian culture effectively skipped a generation. She is striving to make up for this loss by consciously seeking cultural knowledge from sources outside her family.

These two youth stated that they want elder mentors, and described their struggles in finding elders from whom they could learn about their culture. They both described situations of abandonment by adults and isolation from their culture. Both talked about trying to learn everything they could from contacts and sources available to them, including an American Indian non-profit organization serving youth.

Two other interviewees described contact with elders on a very occasional basis – every year or so – but did not view this as much of a problem. However, they did mention several potential benefits of more interaction with elders, which will be discussed further in a later section of this report.

"I see my mom's mom and dad almost every day. They teach me things all the time. Like what happened back then, things about our culture and talking Indian. I speak it about half way. They said that if I keep on working, talking my language, I could be fluent by the time I'm twenty."

At the other end of the spectrum, Tony Mallard, a fifteen-year-old boy, lives with one set of grandparents who have been teaching him his native language for years. He participates in cultural and spiritual activities, and is involved in teaching his younger siblings about Indian culture and ideas about how to live well. But he sees the generation gap in other young people's lives. Tony talked about how elders don't really understand what youth are doing and why. About other people his age, he says, "More Indians are in gangs now than being at home and listening to what the elders say."

Others like eleven-year-old Alicia Peterson were in contact with elders on a regular basis, though less intensively than Tony. Alicia sees her grandfather "practically every week or so" and visits her grandmother in a nursing home about every month. About the generation gap, she says, "I don't think we talk enough now. It's mostly about work now, the older people are always at work."

Some youth expressed the thought that older Indians ought to come teach them about being Indian. One youth stated, “. . .they should be here more for us and teach us our culture, and teach us that we can actually achieve things in life.” We asked another youth what she would talk to an elder about if the opportunity arose. She replied, “Native culture, and just about everyday life. I used to talk with . . . all about my native culture, and she said ‘wow,’ someday you can be an advocate for Native Americans. I am so strongly proud of my native culture and I believe everybody should know about our native culture, the truth about our native culture.”

One 13-year-old girl talked about a struggle she had with school, “I went to Indian Education for six years. I like it. They talked about drugs a lot. I get tired of hearing it. I already know not to do drugs. I do not need to hear it all the time. At first, I liked it that they were taking me out of math class. Then my friend found out about it and said, ‘you know your culture, you know who you are.’ Actually, I felt kind of relieved to go back to math class. I need to know math.”

Elder Perspectives

“Nobody’s teachin’ ‘em, nobody’s teachin’ ‘em.”

Many of the elders lamented how infrequently their grandchildren visited, and expressed an inability to interact comfortably with youth when the opportunity arose. In the above quote, Albert Hendricks was both commenting on the current situation and placing at least partial responsibility on older generations for youths’ shortcomings. Young people’s lack of discipline, lack of respect for elders, and unwillingness to “calm down and listen” were often cited as detractors from quality interaction with youth. As Laura Chance elaborates,

“There is a problem with kids not learning important things from their parents. It’s the family circle. We wanted our kids to have a choice and learn only what they wanted to learn. That’s the mistake. We gave them too much choice and not enough guidance from adults. There’s not enough discipline for kids or guidance in teaching them what they should know.”

The common theme in these comments is the notion that today’s culture is too youth-centered. Parents cater to whatever children want to do and what their attention spans seem to be capable of handling, and little time is given to molding youth’s behavior to what adults deem appropriate. In other words, elders complain that no one is taking the time with children.

By merely being in contact with children does not necessarily mean that the elders are involved in passing down cultural knowledge. “It seems as though urban Indians are getting away from the language. They’re turning more toward the white man’s ways,” says Robert James. Yet, he states that “I don’t really spend time with them teaching cultural things. I do try to teach my daughters and grandchildren a few words, but none of them speak the language.” The problem that the elders describe can be characterized as a breakdown in the traditional role of elders. In traditional American Indian society, families look toward elders to play a very active role in educating youth. In mainstream white society, elders are typically relegated to a lesser role and often removed from families. These elders may recognize and dislike this situation, yet they do not feel that they are empowered to change it.

The Need for Intergenerational Exchange

Some would argue that it is inherently important for Indian elders and youth to be involved in each other's lives. But what exactly is lost if this interaction is lacking? What short and long term consequences are there for American Indian youth growing up without elder mentors? What is required to bring youth and elders together? Moreover, does a lack of intergenerational connection spell for new, evolving definitions of American Indians?

The weak link of interaction among youth and elders takes away opportunity for learning and for developing trust. In the old Indian ways, trust was developed out of respect shown for one another. In those days, if a young person failed to approach an elder in a respectful manner, the elder did not feel compelled to share information. While the interviewees in this project definitely stated that they believed in a great need for more interactions among youth and elders, other more immediate needs usually preceded the discussion about the needs, potential benefits and outcomes for youth, elders, and culture to draw closer.

The strength of Indian culture continues to draw Indian children and families together. Despite social intrusions, young people have a capacity and desire to build upon the strengths provided by Indian traditions. Elders understand that many of those returning to reclaim their identity do not fully comprehend Indian traditions. One elder said,

“Children and young people today want so desperately to learn, but they don't know the ways. In their desperation, they are making their own pipes. People are going to sweats all the time. Years ago, they didn't have sweats like this, the Midewiwin set the sweats.”

Most Indian elders agree, even as change is occurring, there is a permanency and longevity of Indian culture. It will never die. By tapping into this strength, families will not only be preserved, but they will flourish.

Older Indians seem to think that younger Indians ought to approach them in a respectful manner in order to learn from them. Less use of native language is noticeable to older Indians. One elder said, “It seems as though urban Indians are getting away from the [native] language. They're turning more toward the white man ways.”

Challenges Going Forward

The Namadji Project generated many initial insights regarding the challenges the American Indian community faces in closing the distance between youth and elders. From the broadest to the most basic, these include:

- family and community structure
- negative attitudes and stereotypes
- perceived generational differences
- differences in communication styles
- practical concerns such as physical distance, transportation, long work and school hours.

Family and Community Structure

Contemporary social structure limits meaningful contact between American Indian elders and youth. Not only because the two groups are often segregated, but also because American Indians today must participate in mainstream society that operates on a different cultural basis. In mainstream society, the nuclear family model that often relegates elders to nursing homes is the first and most obvious structural barrier to intergenerational contact. The problem is much larger in scope, however. Mainstream social norms understand and approve placing both parents in the workplace, children in daycare or school, and older people in care facilities. In other words, mainstream society is age-segregated. These institutions are absent any American Indian cultural accommodations, and as such, none can conceivably promote American Indian culture. This dichotomy is overly simplified, but is an important point when we are examining why American Indian culture and traditions are not being passed from generation to generation. Demonstrating how American Indian youth have a proclivity for learning by observation, Alicia Peterson noted,

“I learn about Mexican culture, not because they taught me about it, I just learn by being around them.” There simply are too few opportunities that allow for youth to “be around” older people.

About getting to know elders, Kim Taylor age 13, said, “If I get to know ‘em, I get to know ‘em.” Apparent indifference is a prevalent attitude that poses real challenges for success-

ful intergenerational contact. Some may recognize a generation gap, but simply accept it as “that’s the way it is.” Most Indian elders commented on a lack of respect and discipline among youth. For instance, Robert James said, “A lot of young people have no respect for the elders. They act as if the elders are in the way.” Elders seem to have experienced negative attitudes from youth, and in turn, foster some negative opinions about young people.

Generational Differences: “Times have changed”

All the elders commented on the overwhelming differences between the world of today’s youth and the different situations that elders encountered growing up. Tom Denton explains these differences and his interest in overcoming them:

“It seems like kids now want to go out to play and don’t want to work, but I was young once so I understand. I think they’re willing to learn. But I don’t like the way they talk and I don’t like rap music. I also think children should be seen and not heard. That’s their generation. Times have changed.”

These sorts of differences range from superficial, to fundamental differences that can create genuine barriers to mutual understanding. Perceived differences create misunderstandings between elders and youth. For instance, an elder, Derrick Charles, relates, “Times were hard then. If you wanted to get decent clothes or shoes you had to go out and work to get them because your parents couldn’t get them, they just barely made enough to feed themselves. It wasn’t like nowadays. Nowadays everything’s easy for a kid.” Eric Wolf challenges this perception, however.

“Some have it easy, but some grow up with alcohol and drug abuse, child abuse, and sexual abuse. That’s hard on some of us. Some of us don’t have it easy. Some of us sacrifice. They should see what we have to go through for a few days. Some of us still grew up in poverty, it’s still like that.”

Communication Styles

The native language that once held communities together is fading from existence. In the old days, Indians had a style of communicating that, compared to today’s standards, was a slow process; nothing hurried about it at all. But today, the more verbal you are, the more likely that modern success will come your way. In contemporary society there is little use for native lan-

guage. No price is connected to it, so one could say it is without value. However, it is valued in a different way, by Indians who know their identity and their culture. They know the premium of the native language. Without it, the culture dies. One Dakota elder said it succinctly, that if we keep going the way we are, “we’ll all end up being little brown white people.” On the horizon, however, it appears that a resurgence of the native language is developing. Of course, if one is to know the context in which the native language thrives, they must be immersed in its use. This means being around the old people for a longer span of time.

To meet the needs of the urban Indian community, local government and private sector social service organizations tend to deal with one issue at a time. They do so, often on a crisis basis, and just as often from a European-based social work mentality. Indian youth in need of services often receive care in this manner. Yet, the encouragement that youth need for improving their self-esteem and identity, the cultural nourishment essential to developing a strong sense of self, are needs left unmet. The multiple effects of damage to a young Indian person’s cultural identity and self-esteem can be seen in the disproportionately high number of dropouts from school, suicide rates, and alcoholism. This is not to say that these problems have one single cause; certainly, these complex problems have many different contributing factors. However, there is also no question that lack of a strong sense of self, including a sense of one’s culture, is a significant contributing factor in myriad social problems.

Historically, American Indian cultural nourishment was orally transmitted. Youth learn their culture as passed down to them by their elders. As the generation gap widens, the means of providing this essential cultural nourishment moves farther out of reach. This report articulates some of the non-physical, but nonetheless crucial, needs that remain unmet when youth and elders lose contact. To put it simply, American Indian youth and elders need to connect. A catalyst is needed to make this connection.

As stated in the beginning of this report, the generation gap cannot be adequately addressed separately from broader problems facing the urban American Indian community. A few of these broader problems include: historical factors separating Indian youth from their families and their culture; current economic and social crises facing urban Indian families; a social structure that removes elders and erases the multi-generational family model; mainstream view of education that relegates learning to the classroom; and others too broad and numerous to mention. This project is too small to encompass all these concerns, yet a narrow focus on the prob-

lem risks ignoring the accurate depth and scope of the problem. To overcome this dilemma, we offer the following recommendations:

- Social researchers to undertake broad scale, discovery-oriented research to more fully explore this topic;
- social service agencies begin chipping away at this problem by incorporating intergenerational components into existing programs;
- program planners, educators, social service agencies, and American Indian leaders create new, innovative venues for elders and youth to come together;
- Indian agencies and policy makers make room at the table for Indian elders when designing and planning programs for the Indian community.
- all these groups report their observations and results to the broader community, including policymakers.

In summary, as the future unfolds organizations serving the urban American Indian community must consider developing and implementing culturally sensitive and/or culturally competent programs. Invoking Indian culture is a very real method in which to work with Indian youth. Too many Indian youth miss out on the positive experiences of growing up with their culture. Many have to reach adulthood before realizing what they missed; some never do.

*From nowhere we come and into nowhere we go. What is life?
Life is the flash of a firefly in the night, it is the breath of the buffalo in the wintertime. It is the little shadow which runs across the grass, that loses itself in the sunset.*

Chief Crowfoot
Siksika Nation
Sayings of the Elders, John W. Friesen. Detselig Enterprises Ltd.
Calgary, AB, Canada 1998