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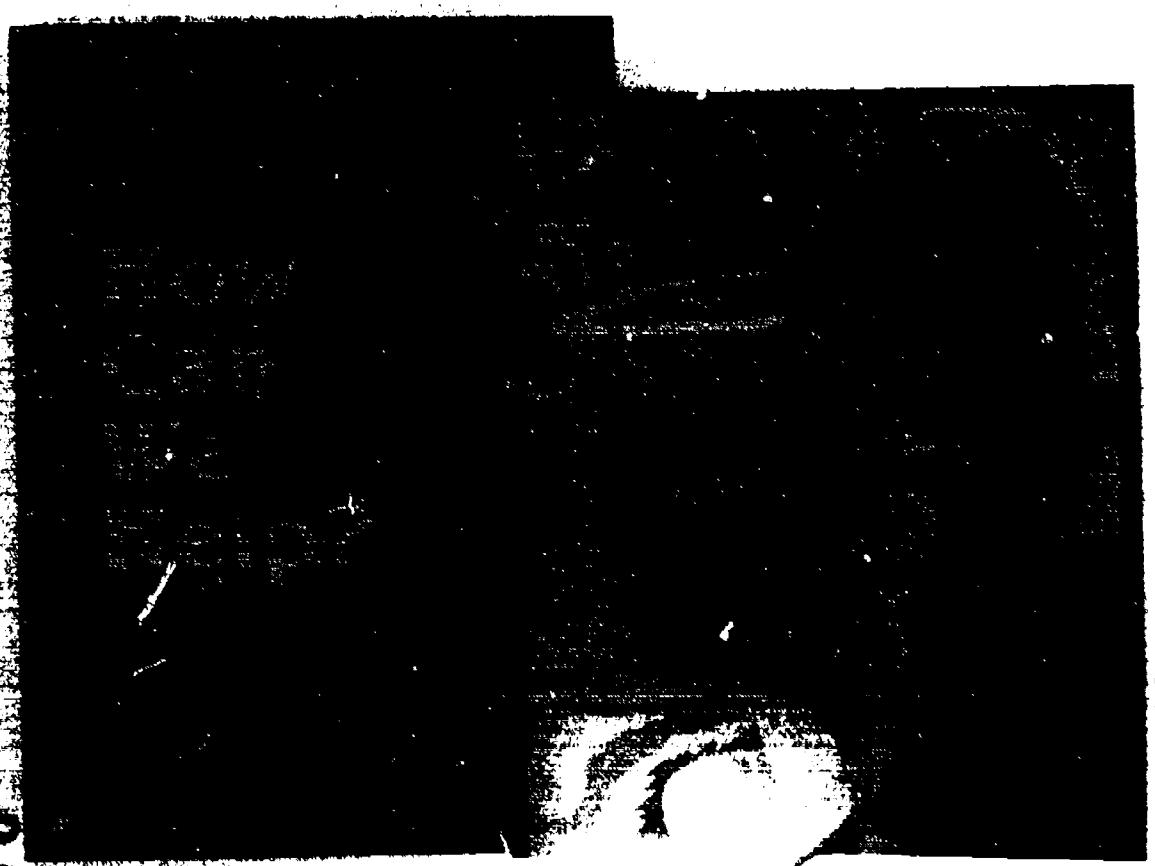
ABSTRACT

Research suggests that Indian youth who identify strongly with a specific tribal culture or with family members who maintain traditional Indian values are much less likely to be at risk for alcohol and drug abuse. This booklet describes four tribal programs that seek to increase the tribal identity of adolescents. Each of these programs emphasizes a sense of belonging among participants and sponsors activities that are drug and alcohol-free. On the Wind River Reservation (Wyoming), Shoshone and Arapahoe teenagers have built a living history village. Youth who have learned their tribal traditions dress in traditional clothing and operate the village as a tourist attraction. At Fort Peck Reservation (Montana), Assiniboine and Sioux youth give away star quilts made by their families during traditional ceremonies. Both giving and receiving a quilt are great honors. In San Juan Pueblo (New Mexico), several adults teach young people traditional dances, drumming, composing, language skills, and costume and moccasin making. The community dance group has performed internationally, and former dancers have become community leaders and new role models for youth. For two years the Gila River Indian Community (Arizona), with support from United National Indian Tribal Youth, has operated the Akimel O'Odham/Pee-Posh Tribal Youth Council. This 14-member youth council is a replica of the tribe's governing body and has the responsibility of advising tribal officials. (SV)

Strong Tribal Identity Can Protect Native American Youth



Strong Tribal Identity Can Protect Native American Youth

How Can We Help?

Introduction

Who am I? And, where do I belong?

Teachers, counselors and others who work with Indian youth are increasingly suggesting that Native American youngsters may be having an especially difficult time answering these questions.

There is growing concern that many Indian young people are caught in a no-man's land between their traditional tribal culture and the culture of the dominant society. This, it is suggested, produces fuzzy self-images and confusion concerning identity which, in turn, lessens self-esteem and robs Indian youth of clearly defined values to help them make positive life-choices.

The result, many believe, can be seen in the very high rate of alcohol and substance abuse among Native American youth, a rate three times greater than the rate for adolescents in the general population.

This booklet looks at: data concerning the relationship between tribal-identity and risk for alcohol and substance abuse; implications for substance abuse prevention programs; and examples of various efforts to increase the tribal identity of Indian youngsters.

The examples described include: a living history village operated by teens on the Wind River Reservation; the adaptation of a tribal tradition by youngsters on the Fort Peck Reservation; a tribal youth dance group at the San Juan Pueblo; and a youth council with representation on the tribal council at the Gila River Reservation.

All of these efforts are dedicated to building the tribal identity of Indian youngsters in a manner which promotes positive self-esteem and healthy life choices.

The Data on Tribal Identity

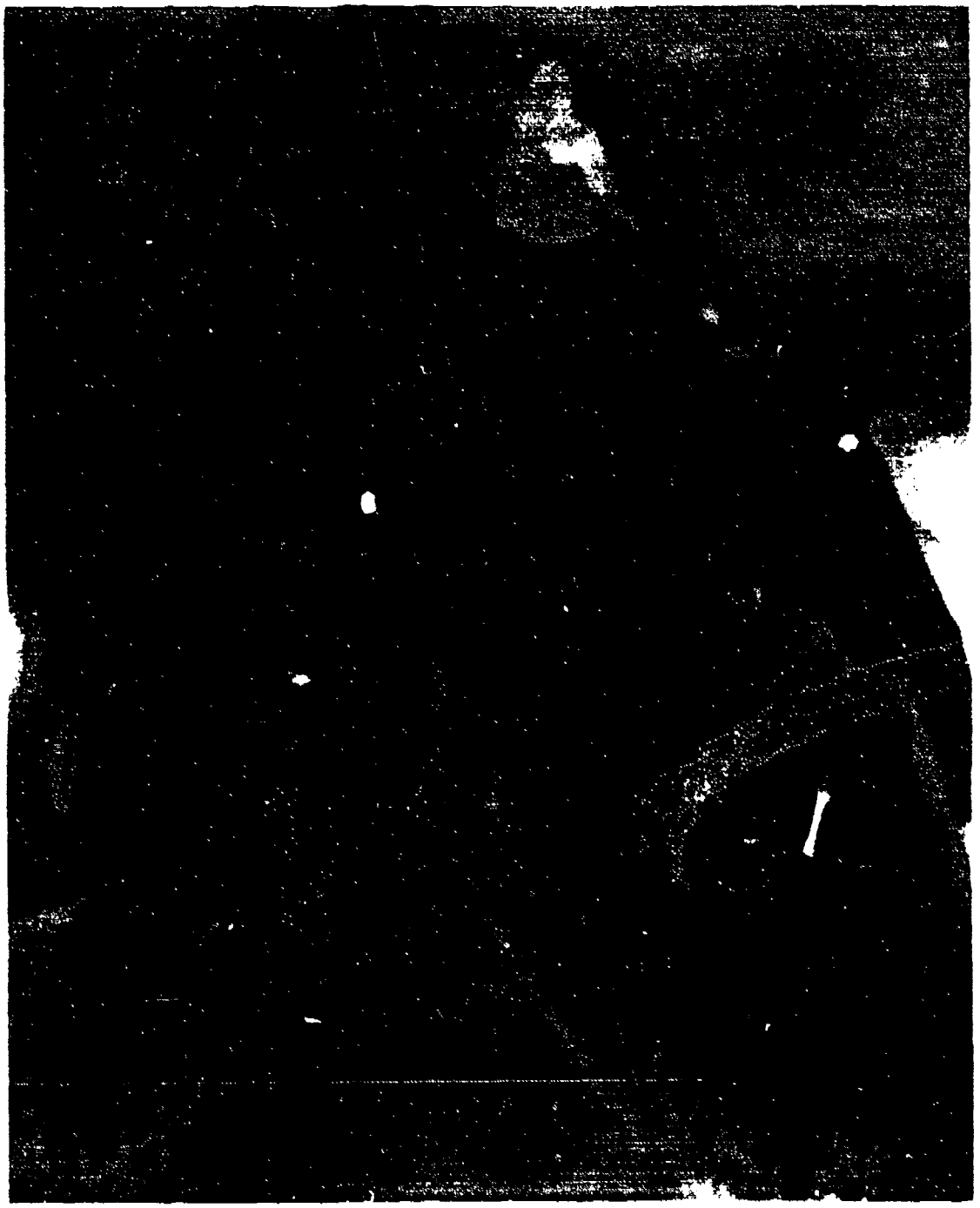
In 1985, Velma Garcia Mason, now Special Assistant to the Director of the Office of Indian Education within the Department of Education, conducted a study of 2,000 Native American adolescents.

Mason found that Indian youth who identified strongly with a specific tribal culture appeared to gain some protection against alcohol and drug abuse.

Mason's statistics show that youth who reported using no drugs or alcohol—or who discontinued use after a one-time trial—exhibited a high identity with family members whom they described as maintaining traditional Indian values.

On the other hand, she found that Indian youth who reported significant alcohol or drug involvement tended to show an absence of, or a very weak, identity with their tribe. In addition, involvement in dangerous drugs such as amphetamines, barbiturates, cocaine, hallucinogens, or heroin, was found to be highly related to low tribal identity.

Mason thus concluded that Indian youth who are at highest risk for dangerous drug involvement lack a stable, positive self-image which is directly related, at least in part, to their perception that they are not a meaningful part of their specific tribe.



Implications for Substance Abuse Prevention

What do these ideas mean in terms of designing programs and activities to help Indian youngsters make positive choices about alcohol and substance abuse?

Tribes and Indian organizations in all parts of the country are coming to feel that their youngsters will make better choices about alcohol and substance use if they recognize and understand their tribal backgrounds.

There are two reasons for this. First, more and more evidence is showing that Indian youth who recognize their tribal affiliations and heritage feel better about themselves. They gain positive self-esteem that comes with belonging to something larger than themselves. This positive self-esteem helps them make, and stick to, the choice to say "no" to drugs.

Secondly, as Indian youngsters come to understand their cultures, they learn, as the Swinomish Tribal Mental Health Program points out, that "drinking alcoholic beverages is strongly disapproved in traditional Indian society and is contrary to traditional Indian values." The use of alcohol is, the Swinomish Program reminds us, strictly prohibited during participation in traditional spiritual activities.

It is not clear how Indian youth are affected by identifying with "pan-Indian" concepts. Some researchers (Mason, in particular) have raised concerns that youngsters whose self-images are based on pan-Indian identity may experience the negative effect of interpreting Indian as a "disadvantaged minority." This kind of Indian identity, Mason warns, may increase a youngster's risk for substance abuse.

For now, then, many Indian tribes and organiza-

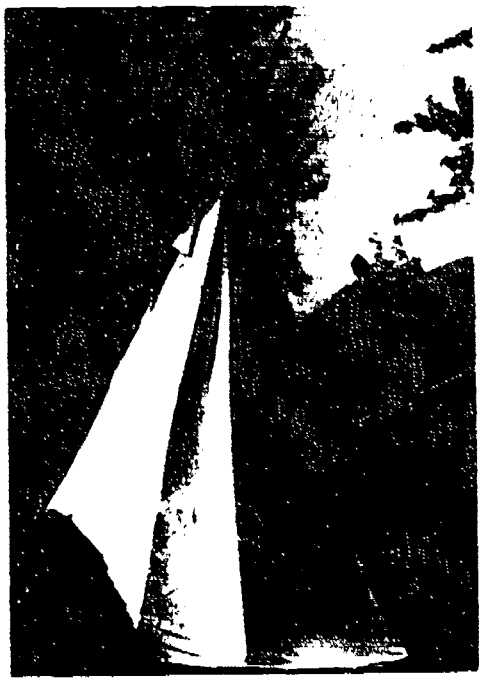
tions are proceeding with the assumption that a youngster's risk for substance abuse can be reduced if the youngster is given the opportunity to participate in positive activities which stress some kind of connection to the youth's particular tribe.

The activity involved may range from traditional cultural practices like dancing or other ceremonies, through incorporation of traditions into contemporary events, to brand new events like alcohol and drug-free tribal graduation celebrations.

The important thing is that the feeling of an individual's tribal pride and unity be transmitted.

The following sections of this booklet provide examples of four types of tribal programs which are being successful in helping to increase the tribal identity of youngsters involved in them.

These programs include: one which teaches its participants their tribes' history and traditions for the purpose of sharing these traditions with others; one which has incorporated a several-hundred year old Indian tradition into the community basketball court; one which teaches and demonstrates traditional tribal dances to and through a travelling dance team; and another which has developed, and is operating, a tribal youth council as a functioning part of its community's governmental structure.



Identifying through Living History

Six teepees, made by Shoshone and Arapahoe teenagers, stand on the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming at the center of a living history village which is envisioned as a potential tourist attraction.

This summer, as it has for the past three summers, the teen-made village employed about a dozen community youngsters whose job it was to learn their Shoshone and Arapahoe tribal traditions with the intention of sharing them with visitors.

Plans for the future call for having tribal youth, in traditional clothing, operate the village—which is situated 90 miles south of Jackson Hole, WY—in the same manner it would have functioned several hundred years ago. Meat will be hung to dry, fry bread will be made, and berries will be prepared. Clothing will be made, and crafts will be produced.

The Wind River Reservation Youth Council, a nonprofit organization, sees the village's potential as a revenue producer with enough hope that they have contracted a management consultant to market the concept through tourism channels.

Pat Bergie, director of the youth council, has additional hopes for the village. "The Shoshone and Arapahoe tribes," says Pat, "also see the village as a

deterrent to alcohol and substance abuse among our young people."

"Through the village, we hope to show our youngsters what the traditional tribal ways were like. Just in introducing our young people to their heritage, we can send them strong no-use messages."

Pat explains that both the Shoshone and Arapahoe cultures, although they were very different one from the other, utilized drugs only for medicinal or religious purposes.

"We plan to show our youth several things," she adds. "First, we want them to see the beauty and strength of their own, and each other's, tribal traditions. We want to give them an opportunity to develop strong tribal identity and, with this, positive self-esteem."

"With a strong identity and self-esteem, we believe our youngsters will see that there is no room for substance abuse and other such things."

After three operating summers, Pat is asked, do you see any evidence that your belief is working? Does increasing a youngster's tribal identity really lessen his/her risk for alcohol and drug abuse?

Pat admits it is difficult to measure the program's present or potential success.

"Some kids," she says, "are exhibiting a stronger interest in their culture. Some, who had no previous interest, are developing associations with their tribal backgrounds. And, others, who were already into their culture, have increased their knowledge."

Pat offers another possible gauge of success. "Our youth council, which operates the village," she says, "has developed an Indian dance program which travels and demonstrates tribal dances."

"And, Eddie Wadda, one of the past presidents of the youth council—a young man who participated in helping build and operate the village last summer—has undertaken to run an alcohol and drug-free 'night club' for teens here on the reservation."

"These things count as success," Pat concludes, "and we like to think that our youngsters' feeling good about their heritage has something to do with these things happening."

For more information on the Wind River Indian Village program, contact: Pat Bergie, Director of the Wind River Reservation Youth Council, PO Box 1020, Fort Washakie, WY 82514. Telephone: (307) 332-6676.

Bringing Tradition into Today

Every basketball season, the use of a several hundred year old Indian tradition, given a modern twist, reminds Indian youth in northwestern Montana that they are proud to be Native American.

This visible display of tribal pride—along with the unity, enthusiasm and fun generated by busy game schedules--helps to significantly reduce the amount of drug and alcohol abuse among Indian youngsters during basketball season each year on the Fort Peck Reservation, according to Karen Red Tomahawk, Prevention Supervisor for the Adolescent Aftercare Outpatient Program at the Spotted Bull Treatment Center.

The tradition responsible for the colorful display of tribal pride is an adaptation of the Indian give-away during which parents and family members honor their youngsters through the presentation of ceremonial star quilts.

In special ceremonies, held between games, Fort Peck Indian basketball players and cheerleaders--like other tribal youngsters in the area—give away the prized star quilts. To give a quilt is recognized as a great honor, a symbol of the young giver's having achieved a worthy goal.

The quilts are usually made by the families of the basketball players—aunts, grandmothers, mothers. For the giving families, providing the quilt is a labor of love and dedication, a concrete expression of pride in their youngsters. It can be a major financial sacrifice also, since a quilt—depending upon the materials it's made of—can cost $150-500.

To receive a quilt is also a great honor. The giver chooses with care the individual whom he/she will honor with a quilt. The receiver may be a coach, a player on another team, a cheerleader, or a community member who has made a contribution to the school or sports program.

The ceremonies during which the quilts are presented are impressive and memorable. They generally take place between end-of-the season tournament games and draw respectful attention from the crowd. Everyone stands and, as the quilt is wrapped around the shoulders of its recipient, photographers are busy snapping pictures.

The family plays a central part in each ceremony. Indian players come forward with their families to give the quilts. And, when a young person receives a quilt, his or her parents come forward as well.

Ken Ryan, a past Chairman of the Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes of the Fort Peck Reservation, summarizes the giveaways. "For our young people to be involved in these ceremonies is a great privilege and one of the most visible aspects of the Plains Indian culture. It strongly reflects important traits such as love, sharing, caring, sacrifice, pride and reverence to the creator."

The star quilt ceremonies, says Karen Red Tomahawk, provide a means through which important tribal values and attitudes are demonstrated. The ceremonies help Indian youngsters visualize their tribal identity. The star quilt ceremonies help young people feel they "belong" to something that is strong and good.

In this manner, tribal identity is significantly helping to protect Indian youngsters from the ravages of alcohol and substance abuse.

Karen Red Tomahawk can be contacted through the Spotted Bull Treatment Center, Box 1027, Poplar, MT 59255. Telephone: (406) 768-3852.

Gaining Recognition Through Tribal Dancing

For fifteen years, Andy Garcia has been passing to the young people in the San Juan Pueblo a special knowledge given him by his two grandfathers.

Through a community dance group, Garcia has given a whole troupe of youngsters "something to do with their idle time, an alternative," he says, "to getting involved with alcohol and substance abuse."

And, with the fun they have, the dancers in the San Juan youth troupe have gotten a heavy dose of tribal identity and lots of pride in their heritage.

How could it be otherwise when such things happen? Several years ago, 13 San Juan teenage dancers were invited to be special guests and performers in the 25th annual international folk festival. The group was flown—all expenses paid—to Spain, where they spent eight days.

"We were given the red carpet treatment," remembers Garcia. "Our hosts made us feel that they were honored we had come. It was clear to us that everyone felt it is very special that our young people are still practicing the traditions of our ancestors."

"Our dances were very popular," Garcia adds. "We were invited to all the festival's special events. Through these invitations, we attended and participated in parades and performances by the Russian, African, Fili-

pino, European, Caribbean and South American exhibitors. From this, the pride our dancers feel in our traditions was strongly reinforced."

The San Juan dancers' experience in Spain has been followed by other exciting opportunities. In the summer of 1990, the group danced at the North American Indigenous Games in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, and were selected to perform at the Chiefs' Summit. In November, 1990, they will go to Dallas, TX, where they will perform. In 1991, they are off to Europe for a week of dancing and, in 1992, they will dance again in Spain.

San Juan young people who have participated over the years in the dance group have benefitted in many ways, Garcia believes. "Drawing on the pride they have developed through participation in the traditional ways of their people, many of our dancers go on to be especially productive adults."

"One, for example, is a police officer, one works in the credit union at Los Alamos, one has a masters degree. People look up to them. We are proud of these past dancers and they serve now as role models for our youth."

The San Juan dance program has been so successful that Garcia and three other pueblo traditionalists are beginning a new group in a neighboring pueblo. This pueblo, Garcia says, lost its Indian culture back in the 1800s and its youngsters today suffer a lot of "negative vibes" for this from their peers in surrounding communities.

"For this and other reasons," Garcia says, "the youngsters in the neighbor pueblo see their ancestry in a pretty negative light. We want to reverse this and show them the positive things about their heritage."

Andy Garcia and his companions—Peter Garcia, Joe V. Trujillo, and Vinton Lonnie—intend to teach drumming, composing, and language skills as well as dance steps. They also will teach costume and moccasin making along with carving skills. As the youth prepare for their dancing, they will learn the history of their people and the significance of the things they are doing and making.

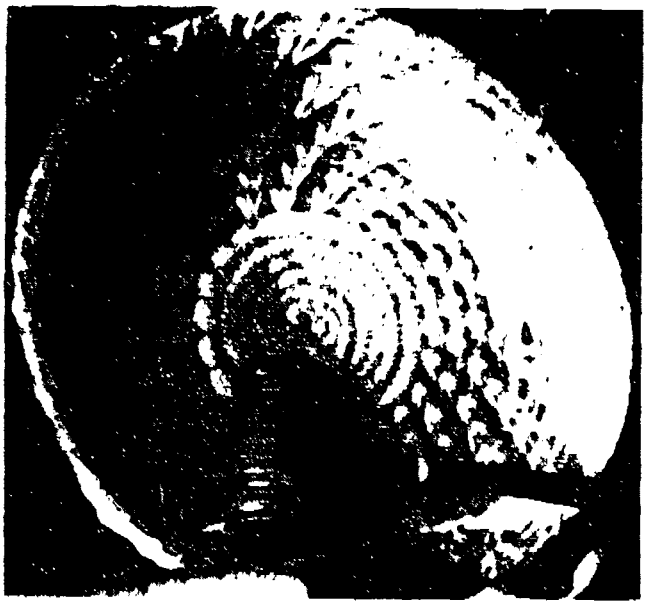
As we work with these new youngsters," Garcia says, "we will give them the heritage of their grandfa-

thers. We will show them that they can now carry on this heritage. We will teach them that they may one day be tribal leaders. We will put ourselves before them as examples and as role models. We will offer them a positive identity as Indians."

Garcia feels strongly that Indian culture and traditions leave no room for alcohol and drug abuse. And he has a hopeful dream that one day the young people from San Juan pueblo will join the young people of its neighbor pueblo to dance together. And, then, he says he dreams of establishing an Indian youth dancing training center where all the youth from all of the Eight Northern Pueblos will come together to dance.

"Together We Will Dance," he dreams.

For information on the San Juan youth dance program, contact: Andy Garcia, Substance Abuse Prevention Specialist for the Eight Northern Pueblos, PO Box 1055, San Juan Pueblo, NM 87566. Telephone: (505) 852-4265.



Counting in Tribal Government

For two years, the Gila River Indian Community has fully funded the operation of the Akimel O'Odham/Pee-Posh Tribal Youth Council.

This 14-member council, which is a replica of the tribe's governing body, is elected and located within the programmatic section of the tribe's executive branch. It has an advisory responsibility for helping tribal officials and programs assure that they are responsive to the needs of the community's young people.

Greg Mendoza, the youth council's 24-year-old full-time paid program coordinator, says the tribe's show of commitment to its youth is coming across loud and clear.

"Our kids are hearing that the tribe wants them to take an active part in the community. They are clearly being asked to stand up and be counted. They are being told that they are valued and important, and they are being provided a serious and respected channel through which to voice their opinions."

As youngsters of the Gila River Indian Community become more and more involved in tribal affairs, they learn that what happens today is influenced by what has happened in the past. They learn that today's issues are colored in part by the tribe's cultural values

and traditions. They come to understand the reasons why the tribe feels this or that is important.

As they learn, the youngsters gain respect for their tribe and for themselves as a meaningful part of its system. By participating, they develop positive identity as tribal members and positive self-esteem as individuals.

"Kids who last year didn't even know who the tribal governor was," Mendoza says, "are now scheduling meetings with their district representatives and meeting with members of various tribal committees. These youngsters are seeing how things work. They are learning and practicing tribal values. They are voicing their feelings."

"As they do these things, youngsters see themselves as useful. They also see that they can benefit directly from their involvement."

"Some of the benefits of their involvement are concrete and translate into youth services, enrichment programs, educational scholarships, and recreational events."

The Akimel O'Odham/Pee-Posh Youth Council, however, did not develop overnight.

J. R. Cook, Executive Director of United National Indian Tribal Youth, Inc., (UNITY)—a national Indian organization which supports the development of tribal youth councils among American Indian and Alaska Native communities—says the Akimel O'Odham/Pee-Posh Youth Council's development took a lot of work and its path was not always smooth.

"Five years ago," says Cook, "Greg Mendoza and several of his peers found themselves in a situation much like many Native youth throughout the country. They felt they had no voice in tribal affairs and that they were unable to influence decisions which affected them. They also had become painfully aware of the fact that alcohol and drugs were plaguing many in their age group."

UNITY kept encouraging Mendoza and his peers to take the necessary steps to develop a youth council. "We saw this," Cook explains, "as a means of mobilizing and empowering the youth of the Gila River Indian Community."

Mendoza and 10 young college students responded. They called themselves the Gila River Youth Advocates and, with some guidance from UNITY, they started through a process.

For a year, the Gila River Youth Advocates talked about their ideas. They visited key people in the community: tribal council members, BIA and IHS staff, educators. The advocates explained their feelings and asked for input.

Through these interchanges, the advocates gained support and the concept of a youth council began to develop. By the time the youth council concept had any significant concreteness, the idea "belonged" to a wide range of community members. Key people had already "bought in."

For the past decade, UNITY has been advocating and assisting the development of youth councils within schools, colleges, tribes, villages, and urban areas as a means of utilizing the talents and energies of youth to "make a difference" in their own lives and in their respective communities. As a result, UNITY has developed some suggested steps for organizing an effective youth council. Cook explains these suggested steps.

First, he says, young people can start by signing a petition indicating their interest in developing a youth council.

Next, they might form a steering committee. In addition to young people, the membership of the committee should include representatives of agencies which work with youth and community leaders who are strongly committed to youth.

The steering committee, Cook says, has several tasks. It must get approval from the elected tribal/village officials, but must be careful to remain nonpartisan and separate from tribal politics that are subject to change with changing administrations.

It must prepare a resolution for presentation to the tribal/village council whereby the council: sanctions the development of the youth council; designates an individual, and/or establishes a youth affairs committee on the community's council, to be responsible for working as a liaison with the steering committee; and recognizes the youth council as a part of the permanent tribal/village government structure.

Next, the steering committee must begin work on describing the structure and function of the youth council. Cook recommends patterning the youth council after the tribal/village council, utilizing whatever kind of structure the tribe or village uses.

The steering committee must develop guidelines by which the youth council will operate. A constitution and bylaws, which are eventually submitted to the tribal/village government for approval and are formally approved by the community's youth, are also necessary. These, Cook states, must be tailored to the values and traditions of the community and must meet the needs of the youth, as the youth themselves see these needs.

Cook stresses that formality is beneficial. "Young people in a basketball game need rules to play by. It's the same thing for a youth council. There must be rules. The rules must be clearly defined, and they must be followed."

Cook also emphasizes that adults working with the steering committee must serve as facilitators and must not dominate the young people.

As an aside, Cook mentions that UNITY is presently working with 25-30 tribes and villages around the country as these work to establish youth councils. The youth councils, Cook says, are in various stages of development.

UNITY makes a kit available to anyone interested in developing a youth council. The kit contains suggested developmental steps and sample guidelines, resolutions, bylaws and a sample operating manual.

UNITY also has a small staff which works with tribes and villages, by mail and telephone and on-site where it can be arranged. It is also currently working to develop a team of peer and adult leaders who have been involved in establishing youth councils. This team will be available for consultation.

Cook believes that many Native American youth feel alienated from their tribes and, accordingly, experience a sense of hopelessness that may lead them to such things as alcohol and substance abuse. He sees participation of young people in a youth council as a means of empowerment and mobilization toward ben-

eficial activities.

"If we toss them the ball," he says, "young people will accept responsibility and address their problems constructively."

Mendoza agrees. Moreover, he sees the involvement of Gila River's youth as essential if the tribe is to maintain itself.

"Out of a tribal population of 10,000 Pima-Maricopa Indians, 50 percent of us are under age 25. Young people are a very substantial portion of our tribe and they must be prepared to carry on our culture if that culture is to survive."

The Akimel O'Odham/Pee-Posh Youth Council, Mendoza explains, is not a cardboard puppet. It has real depth and many dimensions. Just like the tribal council on which it is patterned, the youth council has two elected representatives from each of the reservation's seven districts. It meets twice a month, often in the tribal council chambers; and, four times a year, the youth council appears before the tribal council to present a formal accounting of its activities and viewpoints.

Mendoza's job, which is financed with tribal funds, is to serve as an executive advisor to the youth council and as an assistant to the council's elected president. He, thus, becomes responsible for executing measures which the youth council identifies as part of their action plans.

Mendoza is asked whether he feels the Akimel O'Odham/Pee-Posh Youth Council has had any impact on drug use among the reservation's youth.

"Yes," he responds immediately.

First, he says, it is a clear and widely publicized rule that all members of the youth council must refrain from alcohol and drug use and that all council activities are alcohol and drug-free.

"This is not hindering the popularity of our activities," Mendoza says. "Rather it is showing that we don't need alcohol and drugs to have fun."

As an example of how youth are attracted to the Akimel O'Odham/Pee-Posh Council's activities, Mendoza describes several recent projects.

"We sponsored our fourth annual youth conference this past August," he says. "Over 500 Indian

youth from here and from six other Arizona reservations attended. The conference's theme promoted non-usage and drug-free fun. It was a big success."

Mendoza says the Akimel O'Odham/Pee-Posh Youth Council has also sponsored two successful Grad Night celebrations based on a concept being promoted nationally as part of a safety campaign.

The first of the Gila River Grad Nights, which was held a year ago as two parties in different parts of the reservation, attracted over 1,000 people who celebrated the graduation of 300+ eighth graders and high school seniors.

The Grad Night celebrations lasted from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. and were chemical-free. They were attended by the graduates, their parents and friends. Rules called for participants to stay the entire 12 hours. Leaving and returning was not allowed.

Each party began with a recognition dinner followed by a dance with a popular local radio disc jockey. There was an award program, games, videos, snacks. Finally, a breakfast ended the festivities.

Mendoza says the Akimel O'Odham/Pee-Posh Youth Council is also working to develop a community youth agenda. Eight problems have been identified, with sobriety as a goal topping the list. Strategies for reaching the agenda's goals are being developed.

Mendoza says the youth council will take its agenda this fall to the tribal council.

"Hopefully," he concludes, "the Akimel O'Odham/Pee-Posh Youth Council and the Gila River Tribal Council will commit themselves to working together to implement the agenda."

Information on the Akimel O'Odham/Pee-Posh Youth Council may be obtained from Greg Mendoza, Program Coordinator, PO Box F, Sacaton, AZ 85247. Telephone: (602) 562-3334. FAX: (602) 562-3422.

Information on UNITY's work with tribal youth councils may be obtained from J. R. Cook, United National Indian Tribal Youth, Inc., PO Box 25042, Oklahoma City, OK 73125. Telephone: (405) 424-3010.

To obtain a free copy of a 60-page booklet, illustrated with Native American designs, which outlines how to organize a Grad Night party, contact the

National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information, Department P-3, PO Box 2345, Rockville, MD 20852. Telephone: (301) 468-2600. Cite publication #RP0723.

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The text was written by Nancy Gale based on interviews with individuals working with Native American youngsters and tribal-identity programs. The names of these individuals are referenced in the text.

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