



(Left) PCUN's Risberg Hall during a mayoral visit. (Right) Young community members at CAPACES. Photos courtesy PCUN.

changes; we could look further into the distance and take a risk.” Rising Latino leaders will certainly benefit from her strategy.

COMMUNITY SUPPORT: THE NATIVE AMERICAN YOUTH AND FAMILY CENTER (NAYA)

Columbia Boulevard in Northeast Portland is the opposite of scenic. Cars and trucks speed down it en route to the airport, to the Gorge, to Vancouver, or to one of the many industrial complexes and freight businesses that line it. Those who live nearby are those who cannot afford to move away, and its crime rates, as well as its accident rates, are high. But among the trucks and warehouses is a low-lying building with sprawling wings and outbuildings: it is home to the Native American Youth and Family Center (NAYA), an institution that provides a wide variety of services and a sense of community to Portland's Native American population.

NAYA's work supports a population often in dire need. In the 2010 Census, the Portland Metropolitan area contained almost fifteen thousand Native Americans, many of whom are among the poorest residents of the Metro area. About a half of NAYA's clients live in deep poverty. Portland's Native American community suffers the highest rates unemployment and homelessness of any demographic, and it also endures severe health crises, including high rates of depression, addiction, and diabetes.¹⁰ High school graduation rates for Native youth were hovering at around 50 percent in 2012,¹¹ and Native children make up nearly a quarter of all those in foster care in Multnomah County. In these rates of inequalities and challenges, NAYA's community of urban Native Americans parallels tribal communities (those still living on or near tribal lands or reservations). However, NAYA's community faces added difficulties. Hailing from over 380 different tribes, many of Portland's American Indians were uprooted from tribal life because of tribal termination and forced relocation or, for younger generations, because of weak economies that drove their families to Portland in search of work. Portland's scattered and often seemingly invisible urban Indian population



Young children dancing at NAYA's Neerchokikoo Powwow, 2012. Courtesy NAYA.

can feel both disconnected from their respective tribal cultures and unable to access community-based, culturally sensitive help.

NAYA's constituents, then, are more diverse than tribal communities. Twenty-one different tribes are represented in Washington County alone, and NAYA serves three other counties besides, as well as clients who come to Portland from more distant tribal communities. Matt Morton, from the Squaxin Island tribe in the southern Puget Sound, is NAYA's executive director and has worked in Oregon for a long while. Matt says that NAYA is well placed to help these groups because they are working from within the Native community rather than from outside of or above it. "We are effective because we are culturally specific; we're working with knowledge given by the community," he says. "The first group we consult is our Elders Council, but we have an extensive . . . network of board, staff, funders, community members, native and non-native organizations, elected officials, and others. As executive director I feel incredibly empowered to know that we're working to give the community what they need. Everything we do has this foundation of community voice."

NAYA's mission is broad, Matt explains, providing wraparound services and advocacy. "We work with our partners to improve the lives of the community in three clear areas. The first is youth and education services, which include afterschool programs like tutoring, sports, and tribal culture and arts classes; college counseling; spring break and summer camps focused

variously on science, math, language, cultural knowledge, and leadership; our Early College Academy, which is a fully functioning college preparatory high school; and our team of youth advocates, which is based in seventy-nine different schools and does case management and gang prevention and homeless youth work. . . . Gangs and homelessness are big problems with our kids,” Matt adds.

Family services—including Head Start and playgroup programs, domestic violence counseling, elder services (exercise classes, weekday lunches, outings, and help accessing other services and information), and working with foster families and youth as well as with the state to intervene before Native children are removed from their parents unnecessarily—form the second broad area of NAYA’s offerings. Helping mend a broken foster care system is urgent work, Matt says. “The 1978 Indian Child Welfare Act removed about 25 percent of children from their tribal communities and placed them into non-native families; a pretty aggressive and effective way to kill a culture is to remove its children,” he says bluntly. “Unfortunately, Native children still constitute almost a quarter of all children living in foster care, so in addition to fighting to lower these numbers, we do a lot of work with foster families so these children can still interact with tribal communities and elders.”

NAYA’s third area of work is in community empowerment and economic development. It offers leadership development programs and strong and vocal advocacy against discriminatory policies, social biases, and inaccurate government and social assessments of their communities. Economic services are also prominent, including workforce training and development, job search assistance, emergency rental and housing assistance, and home ownership assistance—“we’ve placed 120 families in homes in the Portland area during a time wherein it’s been difficult to get credit,” Matt mentions proudly. They also offer emergency energy relief, a food pantry, and other goods to those in urgent need, and they are working on a microlending program to provide start-up assistance for new businesses. NAYA also houses two in-house income generating businesses—a catering company and a construction company—both of which provide earnings for the organization as well as employment training and income for their workers.

Across all of these programs, they try to retain cultural relevance, taking great care to link services and assistance to tribal traditions. For example, elk antler purses, which some coastal cultures used to carry dentalium shell currency, form the prop for a discussion about savings accounts and other personal banking. And at their Early College Academy, NAYA’s students start off the week by gathering in a circle to engage in a cleansing ritual. It has been so popular that they have asked to do it on Fridays, too, to wipe away the week’s baggage before beginning the weekend. “I think there’s something

about this place that centers you and allows for a little more of the unknown to enter you,” Matt suggests.

That NAYA can feel so welcoming and culturally specific while also providing so many diverse services is a testament to NAYA’s committed and talented staff and to its wide-ranging network of sympathetic organizations, ranging from NARA (the Native American Rehabilitation Association of the Northwest) to a women’s roller-derby team that practices on their grounds.

Philanthropy, too, has played a seminal role. “We’ve been really generously supported by foundations,” Matt says. “To be able to find partners who are generous with their resources but also committed to a level of partnership and service to your community means that you move away from a transaction and more toward a relationship with your donors and supporters, which is wonderful.” The Northwest Area Foundation has been a long-term and constant partner, he says, along with the Meyer Memorial Trust and many other funders.

Individuals like Joe Finkbonner, of the Lummi tribe, also contribute their expertise and resources. Joe is executive director of the Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board (NPAIHB), and his background dovetails neatly with NAYA’s mission. An expert on issues of Native American disease prevention and health, for a number of years he was also his tribe’s general manager. He thus knows that the health of a community is defined broadly, meaning everything from well-lit roads to a well-educated population. There is a tangible link between social and economic inequities and medical prognoses, he says:

With that expanded view of public health, it led me to believe that in order to make a difference in my tribe’s population, we needed the best school system, the best public works, the best law enforcement, and everything else. We believe that you judge a tribe by how well it treats its kids and its elderly: if you are generous and caring to both of those vulnerable populations, it will raise, it will lift up the whole community. NAYA is helping our most vulnerable people, and I feel good that I can help them out with cash when I can. It’s the gift I get, knowing that it’s going to an organization like NAYA.

Contributions from community donors like Joe are a pillar of NAYA’s support, says Matt Morton: “the grassroots community giving that takes place is the most consistent river that flows through the organization.”



Joe Finkbonner and his wife at NAYA’s annual gala. Courtesy the Finkbonner family.



Elders showing off their talents. Courtesy NAYA.

Volunteer support is perhaps the largest tributary of this river, he adds. “The only thing a lot of our people have to offer is their time, their presence, and their emotional support, and that’s invaluable. The fact that we have community volunteers coming here almost every night of the week to provide tutoring, to greet at the door, to provide cultural programming or weekend staffing . . . if it weren’t for that, we’d have to either add another hundred staff members or cut many different programs.”

NAYA’s strong volunteer tradition in some ways reflects the practice of potlatch,¹² Matt says, “where the demonstration of your wealth is in giving it away, and where the community comes together to welcome other communities and to work as a team.” It is a cultural honor, a recognition of leadership, to give freely of your resources and your time, Matt suggests. “That’s the challenge of working in the Native community: if someone says they need you somewhere, you have to go! You do it, not begrudgingly—that’s how we support each other.”

Portland’s Native community still needs all of the support they can get, Matt adds. “There’s a degree of invisibility we still need to overcome. We’ve been told there are no homelessness or gang issues in our population. Eight years ago, when we started doing our housing-to-homeownership program we were told there wasn’t an interest in ownership within the Native community,” he says, frustrated. “We still have a significant number of community members who are in need of stability, whether that’s housing, employment, education, or other issues.” The variety and depth of NAYA’s programming is, by any measure, astounding, as is its huge corps of volunteers and grassroots donors. Matt says that NAYA’s mission, ultimately, is straightforward. “We



Dancers at NAYA Neerchokikoo's Powwow 2012. Courtesy NAYA.

want to be a growing, healthy, and proud community where we have culturally relevant access to safe housing, education, health care, community-owned businesses, and we want our region to realize that in order for all of us as a society to thrive, the Native community needs to thrive.”

THE URBAN LEAGUE OF PORTLAND: EIGHT DECADES OF SERVICE AND ACTIVISM

Like many minority communities, Oregon's African Americans have lived under overtly racist policies until recently. The state's ban on interracial marriages was enforced until 1955; in the 1920s, Oregon's Ku Klux Klan was the strongest in the West; and Jim Crow laws kept the black community segregated for years. Now, the laws have been repealed, but institutional racism and private prejudices still remain. This is borne out by the facts: black incarceration rates are six times those for whites in Oregon, and only 37 percent of black households own their own homes compared with 68 percent of white households. As of 2012, the unemployment rate for African Americans was 18.4 percent compared to a rate of 8.7 percent for whites, and African Americans are still overrepresented in service occupations and underrepresented in managerial and professional positions.¹³

The Urban League, one of Oregon's most established advocacy organizations, is working at a feverish pace to fix this. Its home is a beige brick building near the Broadway Bridge in Portland. Its neighborhood used to be predominantly black; now, its residents are more diverse, and the area