

The National Indian Youth Leadership Project is a national non-profit, based in New Mexico for 20 years. The Mission Statement is "To develop positive Native youth through challenging activities and meaningful experiences in the community and the natural world: to prepare them as healthy, capable, contributing members of their peer groups, families, communities and nations.

Since its inception in the 1980's, the NIYLP has built its nationally recognized educational approach on a foundation of service-learning, outdoor adventure and culture. The model developed by NIYLP features service-learning, which we believe, plays a major role in reconnecting youth with their community, by identifying meaningful roles which can be filled by young people. Further, service-learning enhances academic learning, while reinforcing the traditional culture of the community.

In the mid-1990's, NIYLP undertook a major national effort to bring service-learning to K-12 schools serving Native American youth as well as tribal colleges. The program, the Turtle Island Project (TIP), funded by the Kellogg Foundation, planted the seeds of service-learning across Native America. Many of the schools that were part of the original TIP went on to receive Learn & Serve grants and become mentors to other schools in their states. Several of these schools were featured in the video, produced by Kellogg, entitled "A Culture of Giving. The video was narrated by Buffy Ste. Marie, who explains how service-learning compliments traditional Native approaches to teaching and learning.

One important feature of the TIP was the TIP Gathering, which brought teachers from across the U.S. to New Mexico every summer to deepen their practice. The teachers had the unique opportunity to hear from exemplary Native educators, as well as fellow practitioners on all aspects of service-learning, both school and community-based.

It was during one of the summer service-learning gatherings that the idea for one of our most dramatic service-learning projects was conceived. While walking in an open field on the property of the Sacred Mountain Learning Center, the NIYLP founder, had a vivid image of a large turtle. The turtle is symbolic of Turtle Island, the traditional name of the North American continent in the creation stories of many Native Anasazi tribes. Over a period of nearly five summers, an adobe amphitheatre, nearly 70 feet in diameter, in the shape of a turtle, was built by youth and teachers.

The building of the turtle encompassed a wide variety of teaching approaches, including a unique "whole language" process. Large blackboards were placed in each of the four cardinal directions. The blackboards were used to display new vocabulary words, compare terms in several languages (English, Spanish, Navajo, MicMac, etc.) and capture the quotes of the young people who were working on the project. Journals were kept by students to document the building techniques, as well as feelings and thought on the experience.

NIYLP has assisted youth to research traditional educational processes in various tribal cultures. Terms in the native languages, as well as contemporary examples of culturally based service projects are studied in cooperation with elders. Prominent examples include: •Gadugi, the Cherokee practice, which brought community members together to help those in need, Siyuudze, the Keres term (as spoken at Acoma Pueblo) which is defined as “everybody’s work”. Contemporary example: community ditch work where the entire community comes together to clean the irrigation system in preparation for spring planting.

Examples of NIYLP Service-learning projects

School-wide mural projects –

Thematic murals were designed and painted by elementary students throughout the largest school district in New Mexico.

Construction of a 70’ diameter adobe amphitheatre at the Sacred Mt. Learning Center -

The project included instruction on adobe building, whole language, journaling, traditional art forms and began with a comparison of tribal creation stories.

Community/school gardens

Construction of adobe ovens for senior citizens homes and schools

Trail system construction

Intergenerational tutoring and mentoring

Oral history interviews

Teaching over 500 Navajo elementary students to weave Navajo rugs (involved math and culture).

Construction of a greenhouse

Seed exchange

Programs developed by NIYLP are being replicated in over 50 sites, in 16 states. NIYLP is the recipient of the Exemplary Promising, Effective and Model Program Awards, since 2001. In 2005, NIYLP was recognized as one of the Milestone Programs of the Kellogg Foundation, for their 7th Anniversary celebration.

