




CELEBRATING TEN YEARS OF NATIVE NATION REBUILDERS



NATIVE GOVERNANCE CENTER
IMPACT REPORT 2019



10

Our 2019 impact report celebrates the tenth anniversary of the Native Nation Rebuilders program. The program is a two-year, cohort-based experience that equips Native leaders with tools they can use to help strengthen their communities. Native Governance Center has led the program (originally established by the Bush Foundation in 2009) since 2016.

176 Indigenous changemakers from 22 Native nations have completed the program during the first ten years and gone on to serve as leaders in their communities.

To commemorate this ten-year milestone, we've collected ten Rebuilder stories—one from each year of the program. We hope these stories will inspire you to learn more about and amplify the voices of Indigenous people leading grassroots change movements.

SHARING STORIES, CHANGING LIVES:

176 INDIGENOUS CHANGEMAKERS FROM 22 NATIVE NATIONS

HAVE GRADUATED FROM THE PROGRAM
DURING THE FIRST TEN YEARS.

94%

agreed or strongly agreed that the
program helped them become a more
effective leader in their community.

73%

of alumni have networked with other
Rebuilders to discuss ways to
improve their nations.

97%

agreed or strongly agreed that the
program curriculum empowered them.

94%

agreed or strongly agreed that the
program helped them to design, lead,
and implement efforts to strengthen
their communities.



KIM TILSEN-BRAVE HEART

Kim Tilsen-Brave Heart harnesses the power of good food to bring people together. A Lakota-Jewish entrepreneur who was born on the Pine Ridge Reservation, Kim started her career by supporting first-generation Native business owners. After spending 13 years helping to establish almost 200 Native-owned businesses, she came to a realization: “What I realized is, I know how to open the doors, get a business owner up and running, and help them manage their operation. But I’ve never done it myself, where I’ve had a brick and mortar shop and accountability to a loan.” Kim’s desire to gain personal business experience, coupled with her sudden inability to travel due to a family tragedy, fueled her decision to open Etiquette Catering Co in 2018.

Etiquette offers full-service catering for special events, in addition to themed cooking classes and gourmet charcuterie boards. Kim operates Etiquette in partnership with her husband Brandon out of a small storefront in downtown Rapid City, South Dakota. Etiquette’s focus on local, sustainable, and Indigenous ingredients sets it apart from other caterers in the area. Kim also believes that Etiquette embodies the nation building approach that’s central to the Rebuilders program curriculum. She has already won several awards for her work, but she’s most proud of her business’ ability to build connections across differences. “Most of my classes are 50% Native, 50% non-Native,” Kim explains. “And, while we have difficult conversations, they’re not hostile conversations because they’re over food. I’ve realized that because of Etiquette, we’ve helped to create some amazing allies in the community.”

*“When Tribes create strong,
fair organizational systems,
businesses flourish.”*

VERONICA VEAUX

Veronica Veaux, a citizen of the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe, loves leadership. “I could probably read about leadership until the day I die,” she explains. Veronica demonstrates leadership in both the classroom and the small business world. She’s simultaneously working to complete her dissertation on leadership, inspiring Native students while teaching at Bemidji State University, and running a small business focused on making triathlons more inclusive.

Veronica’s mother, Bonnie Rock, inspired her to pursue her advanced degrees. “I grew up watching my mom, at an early age, attending college and taking night classes,” she notes. Veronica initially pursued an undergraduate degree in business to find a job that’d allow for more flexibility and family time. As she learned more about business, she soon realized its huge potential to open doors. Veronica explains, “I personally believe that business is the way that we’re going to see an uplift of our communities.”

Veronica acknowledges that businesses can’t operate to their fullest potential without a stable external environment. The Native Nation Rebuilders program stresses the importance of capable governing institutions: when Tribes create strong, fair organizational systems, businesses flourish. She credits the program for illuminating the importance of these structures and inspiring her to develop an Indigenous Business curriculum at Bemidji State.

Veronica effortlessly juggles a dizzying array of projects and responsibilities. At the end of the day, she remains focused on supporting those around her. “I’ve been going in a million directions,” she notes, “but it really all comes back to providing opportunities.”





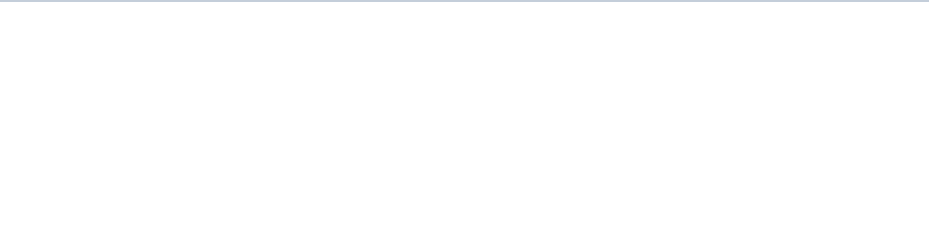
LORRAINE DAVIS

Lorraine Davis (Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate) is leading a movement. She’s leveraging her own personal experience to provide culturally-based support services for the Bismarck Native American community. As the executive director of the Native American Development Center, a nonprofit organization that she started in 2012, Lorraine works to ensure that Native people in Bismarck have a safe place to seek the services they need to thrive.

Lorraine arrived in Bismarck over eighteen years ago. She immediately realized that her new city lacked an organization focused on helping Native people access resources. “I saw the need for something that really would’ve helped me enhance my capability to achieve a better quality of life,” Lorraine explains. She had few connections in Bismarck; she struggled to make ends meet in an unfamiliar place. After overcoming many obstacles,

Lorraine secured stable housing and finished her college degree. She later started the Native American Development Center so that no Native person in Bismarck would have to face a difficult situation alone.

Lorraine believes that investing in people is central to effective community development. She credits the Native Nation Rebuilders program with helping her to hone in on this strategy. Lorraine notes, “When I went through the Rebuilders program, I asked, ‘How do I want to help our people?’” She acknowledges that Tribal governments can help for-profit and nonprofit organizations flourish by creating strong and fair systems. This is an example of the nation building approach that’s central to the Rebuilders program. Lorraine’s work complements Native nations’ efforts to grow their economies by helping individual Tribal citizens succeed.



GRACE GOLDTOOTH

“Language has always been my foundation, my center,” Rebuilder Grace Goldtooth explains. A citizen of Cansa’yapi, the Lower Sioux Indian Community, Grace has dedicated her career to teaching the Dakota language and engaging her community in authentic conversations. In addition to serving as the Vice President of the Lower Sioux Indian Community, she’s a mother, a sundancer, and a mentor. Grace strives to act as a role model in everything she does: “I like to take action on what I’m passionate about, rather than just talking about things.”

Grace credits her mentors for helping her discover her gift for bringing people together, especially during difficult times. She notes, “[My mentors] saw something in me as far as being able to speak about things that are happening in our community.” In 2012, the Lower Sioux Indian Community witnessed a high rate of suicide and overdoses.

Grace immediately took action and mobilized her fellow Tribal citizens around prayer and conversation; she intentionally brought people to the table who don’t normally have a voice. Other leaders in the community took notice, and they encouraged Grace to run for office. She launched her first bid for Tribal council in 2015.

Grace lost the election by one vote. Having recently graduated from the Native Nation Rebuilders program, she decided to use her newly-gained skills to assess her community and her own unique contributions to positive change. In 2017, she ran again, and this time, she won. Grace has since approached her political leadership with a specific focus on strategic and future-oriented thinking.



*“I would hope that as we look at governance,
as we look at Tribal sovereignty,
that we realize the importance of the need for
healing in our communities.”*



COHORT 5

LENNY FINEDAY

Lenny Fineday (Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe) decided to become a lawyer at the early age of five. Many of us quickly lose sight of our childhood career aspirations; Lenny is a shining example of someone who followed their early goals to a T. He achieved his dream by acting strategically throughout his educational journey, signing up for a range of activities that’d prepare him well for a career in law. Lenny eventually earned his law degree from Marquette University and now serves as the government relations counsel for the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe.

Lenny has spent his entire law career working with Tribes. As the Leech Lake Band’s government relations counsel, he’s currently immersed in the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe’s constitutional reform effort as part of his overall duties. Lenny is especially passionate about it because of its connection to nation building and the Rebuilders program curriculum.

For example, he recently held a seminar for Minnesota Chippewa Tribe members on creating systems of governance that center Anishinaabe culture. In addition to constitutional reform, Lenny cites his Tribe’s emphasis on building collaborative partnerships as an example of strong governance grounded in nation building principles.

Outside of law, Lenny is interested in community wellness. He dreams of a future in which Tribal governments emphasize both nation building principles and strategies for healing: “I would hope that as we look at governance, as we look at Tribal sovereignty, that we realize the importance of the need for healing in our communities,” Lenny explains. “Having healthy individuals and healthy communities will help build the decision-making models that we really need.”



Cohort 6 Rebuilder Marc Benoist (left)
with Cohort 9 Rebuilder Alissa Benoist.

COHORT 6

MARC BENOIST

“When you look at the tenets of nation building, each one can be tied to giving back,” Rebuilder Marc Benoist (Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe) explains. Marc’s grandparents taught him to follow the traditional code of giving back; he uses this value to guide his leadership. For Marc, nation building is an ongoing journey. “My thought process has always been, from the day I’m born to the day I’m done, my work is one big project,” he explains. “Native nation building is one chapter, and that chapter informs all future chapters.”

Marc has spent the last 34 years working for Tribal entities. He currently directs the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe’s Office of Planning and Economic Development. In this role, Marc strives to develop pathways to new opportunities. The “capable governing institutions” aspect of nation building resonates with him; he believes that sound policies and procedures help foster job creation.

When thinking about economic development, Marc likes to emphasize Tribal nations’ uniqueness. “When people talk about Tribes, they sometimes see one Tribe succeed, and they say, ‘Let’s replicate that,’” he notes. “But each Tribe is unique in its challenges and resources.” Cheyenne River is no exception. Marc has launched several initiatives that leverage Cheyenne River’s specific needs and strengths, including partnering with the South Dakota School of Mines and Technology. Recently, School of Mines students have been working on a grant-funded project to complete a preliminary architectural report on a Tribal building. Marc hopes that his work to build relationships with students will result in some of them bringing their skills to the reservation after graduation. “Part of taking care of our people is to provide for the future,” he notes.

COHORT 7

Rebuilder alum Nikki Love is pictured second in from the left in the second row from the bottom, alongside peers from NDN Collective.

NIKKI LOVE

Cultural match, a key principle of the Rebuilders program curriculum, guides Nikki Love's work to strengthen Native communities. Nikki is a citizen of the Bois Forte Band of Minnesota Chippewa. Her experience in the Rebuilders program encouraged her to join Zaagibagaang, a Rebuilder-led advocacy group. Since its inception, Zaagibagaang has educated the community on the history of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe (a centralized governmental structure for six member Tribes, including Bois Forte) and options for culturally-based constitutional reform. As a result of the work of Zaagibagaang members like Nikki, the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe launched a constitutional convention process in 2019 to explore what inclusive reform centered on Anishinaabe values could look like.

In addition to her advocacy with Zaagibagaang, Nikki works hard to incorporate cultural match into her work with NDN Collective, an Indigenous-led organization dedicated to building Indigenous power. As the NDN fund managing director, she oversees the organization's loans and investments for Indigenous infrastructure development projects. Nikki explains how her loan process centers community needs and values: "We're developing our own Indigenized investment criteria, project criteria, and screens. In doing so, that's all cultural match. We're making sure that projects are aligned with the values of the Indigenous communities we are working with, have regenerative social and economic impacts, and that communities get to choose the outcomes." Nikki is committed to building an Indigenized future that will help Native nations continue to thrive.

"We're making sure that projects are aligned with the values of the Indigenous communities... and that [they] get to choose the outcomes."



COHORT 8



ANNE O'KEEFE-JACKSON

Anne O'Keefe-Jackson (Lower Sioux Indian Community) finds joy in highlighting her community's strengths. As the human resources director for Jackpot Junction Casino Hotel, she holds a deep understanding of the Lower Sioux Indian Community's contributions to the local economy. "We're the largest employer in our county; to know what we're contributing to this community and surrounding towns is really rewarding and fulfilling," Anne explains.

Anne never set out to work in human resources, but she's learned to love the profession. Growing up, she watched her father serve as the president of a local union; labor-related issues have always been part of her life. Anne started working for her community in grants management and nonprofit-type roles. Eventually, her Tribe asked her to take on the human resources director

position. "I wasn't so sure about it at first," she notes. "But, it's worked out to be a really great way to advocate for people, to help empower people."

Along with her role in human resources, Anne is passionate about using art to elevate Native voices and talents. She was recently accepted into the prestigious Initiators Fellowship, a program administered by several Minnesota community foundations. Anne will receive a stipend, along with guidance from a mentor, to help her follow her dream of supporting Native artists. She hopes to increase access to Native art supplies and broaden the appreciation for traditional Native art, both within her nation and in the surrounding community. Anne credits the Native Nation Rebuilders program for opening several doors for her, including this fellowship.

COHORT 9



CESAR ALVAREZ

Cesar Alvarez has dedicated his life to public service. From a young age, he's been passionate about strengthening his community. Cesar explains, "I was always very shy as a kid. But September 11, 2001 changed that. I helped organize a community-wide bake sale. We raised \$3,000 for the American Red Cross. It felt so invigorating; it felt right. And ever since then, I've been passionate about giving back." A proud citizen of MHA Nation, Cesar graduated at the top of his high school class and attended Harvard University.

Cesar spent a few years working in Washington, DC following his graduation; he eventually decided to return home to the Fort Berthold Reservation to help his grandmother.

"She just got a new house, and I wanted to help her settle in," Cesar notes. "She raised me, and I wanted to be there for her." Around the same time, the North Dakota Democratic-NPL Party recruited Cesar to run for a seat in the North Dakota House of Representatives.

Even though Cesar lost the race by about 300 votes, he still found the experience valuable. He believes strongly in finding ways to connect with everyone, even those who may not agree with him politically. Cesar brings this perspective to his current work in intergovernmental affairs for his Tribe. At the end of the day, he serves his community with an eye toward the future: "In the next ten years, we're going to turn a corner where Tribes are absolutely going to be in the driver's seat," he explains.



COHORT 10

MICHAEL LAVERDURE

For Rebuilder Michael Laverdure (Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa), an Indigenous mindset is a key component of good architecture. He's a partner at DSGW Architects in Lake Elmo, Minnesota and the president of Native-owned planning firm First American Design Studio. Since joining DSGW in 2008, Michael has focused entirely on Tribal projects. He designs structures that align with Native values and community members' future goals and visions.

The Rebuilders curriculum has given Michael a new language to incorporate future thinking, an emphasis on quality, and deliberate community input into his business. For example, the curriculum seeks to avoid "standard approach" leadership that's non-strategic and focused solely on short-term concerns.

In architecture, rushing to build a standard, pre-engineered metal building instead of emphasizing long-term quality poses similar risks. "A lot of times, I'll get a call from a Tribal council member or someone, and they'll say, 'I need to get re-elected. And I want to build my pet project in time so I can campaign on it.' That's the standard approach... But now I have words, and I have examples to show them how it works."

Michael says he can count all of the Native architects he knows on his fingers (and maybe on a few toes, too), so he encourages more young Native people to pursue architectural careers. "Having a Native architect on your team is a force multiplier in cultural match," he says. "We can make sure that a building isn't patronizing to a Native person. Like an appropriation of slapping an Indian headband on a building and saying it's Native. Because that's not it... Being a warrior for your people and ensuring that architecture responds to your culture—that's why Native kids need to be architects."



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NATIVE GOVERNANCE CENTER

is a Native American-led nonprofit organization based in St. Paul, MN. We assist Native nations in strengthening their sovereignty by providing them with Indigenized leadership development and Tribal governance support tools.

We believe that Native people know best how to govern their nations and are working to design a future that elevates their values and community assets. Governance forms a strong base upon which Indigenous-led change can thrive.

CORE PROGRAMS

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT:

We empower Native changemakers to strengthen their communities through the Native Nation Rebuilders program.

TRIBAL GOVERNANCE SUPPORT:

We listen to Tribes' needs and provide them with a variety of Indigenized tools and expertise for developing strong governance systems in support of their sovereignty.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT:

We educate, engage, and share information with the broader community around topics related to sovereignty, nation building, and Indian Country.

BACK COVER:

Reflecting Our Ancestors is an original work created by artist Sarah Agaton Howes to celebrate the Rebuilders program. The piece inspired the design for this report.



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