

Tribal Youth Program Shines in Nulato, Alaska

***The youth come first in my book. That is how it is. They need to know they come first.* –Trisha Madros, Tribal Youth Program Coordinator, Nulato, AK**

As a culturally-based after-school, prevention and youth development program, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's (OJJDP) Tribal Youth Programs (TYP) are designed and operated by Native Americans for Native Americans, with the support of guidelines from Congress and the funder. TYPs serve youth ages 17 and under who are involved, or at-risk of becoming involved, with tribal or state juvenile justice systems. Programs provide services and run activities in a safe location with consistent and reliable hours of operation. The program requires passionate, enthusiastic and caring leadership. The TYP in Nulato engages their youth in cultural activities through the leadership of Trisha Madros, Tribal Youth Program Coordinator.

Trisha's responsibility with her enthusiastic youth group has been the planning, facilitation and gathering of local youth. She pushes them to participate in activities like culture nights, and to sing and dance.

Trisha is a voice for the youth when they have troubles or a conflict. *I am not judgmental, I tell them: 'I can't tell you right from wrong, I can just guide you.'* She shares with them experiences of peoples' pasts: drug and alcohol use, and various other problems. These are real experiences from people the youth know: *It is better to learn from your own people from within, rather than bringing someone in from the outside. They [the youth] know it-it really touches their hearts to see that.*

The TYP provides activities which focuses on mental health and builds connections between peers, their families, and tribal members, including Elders. The TYP uses Native language, local culture and traditions to provide a sense of connection and community.

We are not followers. We are leaders, says Trisha. She encourages the youth leaders to organize and gather other youth, and all of her youth have taken initiatives to step up. One youth, Tristan, has a strong desire to learn the cultural traditions of the Nulato community.

He (Tristan) really wanted to make Native boots so we have classes, but if the Elders get sick he takes the initiative to actually go to their houses with the materials and learn the traditions and their stories. What I admire most about him is he doesn't do it alone. He brings other youth with him. They will go between different Elders just to learn different qualities of how to put a boot together. Tristan (around 15 years of age) can bead, sew, sing, and speak in his Native language. He just got done with the stick dance and wrote his own song for his grandpa. He learned the words through the years, Native singing and dancing.

Every year Trisha takes her youth group to Fairbanks to dance and this year Tristan led the dance group: *Our Athabascan dance group was able to sing every song. All my kids know every single song this year; our biggest accomplishment this year. They knew why the songs were created and what they really meant. The youth took responsibility and ownership.*

They knew all their songs. They did good. They shined.

Through their TYP, the youth in Nulato also go snowshoeing and participate in other activities, and they also enjoy sharing these activities online. Trisha created a Facebook page for the youth where functions and activities are posted: *Our Facebook page is just not about pictures and comments. The youth give each other advice and I remind them about important testing dates, upcoming camps, scholarships and educational resources. I utilize resources like the OJJDP Tribal Youth website and The Resource Basket to find tools and opportunities for my youth.*

The youth come first in my book. That is how it is. They need to know they come first. This support for youth helps prevent at-risk behaviors. Successful youth programs like Nulato's Tribal Youth Program promote healthy, culturally connected youth. For more information on Tribal Youth Programs and resources visit <http://www.tribalyouthprogram.org/>

Reference:

Pearson, Sarah. (2009) Strengthening Indian Country through Tribal Youth Programs. American Youth Policy Forum with the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.
Retrieved from: <http://www.aypf.org/documents/TYPReportLongVersion.pdf>