

15

YEARS OF IMPACT

2011–2026

CENTER for NATIVE AMERICAN YOUTH
aspen institute



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Letter from the Executive Director

Shekóli Swakwe•kú. Greetings everyone. When I began my tenure as Executive Director of the Center for Native American Youth (CNAY) in March 2025, I wanted to better understand the efficacy of CNAY programs, what kind of impact were we having on the youth that we serve. There was a real opportunity to take a pause and reflect on how far CNAY had come in 15 years. In order to do this, we conducted the largest ever alumni survey in CNAY's history to understand the influence our programming has had on alumni over a decade and a half. We surveyed alumni who partook in some of CNAY's more intensive Fellowship programming – from our longstanding Champions for Change program to our 2018 Movement Builders Fellowship. We reached out to alumni from Fellowship cohorts between 2013 - 2025 and received a 72% response rate on our survey - a rate far higher than expected. This alone speaks to the impact of CNAY's programming - connected and powerful.

This report highlights the stories of connection, hope, and resilience that fill the last 15 years of programming. Since its inception, the Center for Native American Youth has worked alongside Native youth across reservations, rural villages, and urban communities to elevate their voices, strengthen leadership pathways, and advance opportunities rooted in culture, community, and self-determination.

As a Haudenosaunee and Mvskoke woman, my leadership is rooted in my responsibility to Indigenous communities and to the next seven generations. My proximity to the Native youth I serve is not something I have to create—it is something I have lived throughout my life and continue to nurture intentionally. This fifteen year milestone is both a celebration and a call to action. From day one, CNAY has created opportunities for intergenerational learning: listening to our elders and uplifting the ideas of our youth. We have amplified the message of today's youth and provided doorways and pathways for Native youth to see themselves as leaders in all spaces and places. Everything we do here at CNAY builds upon the foundation of those who have come before us while laying the groundwork for the future generations. But our work is just beginning.

As CNAY looks ahead, sovereignty must serve as the foundational guide. This means centering the inherent rights, responsibilities, cultures, and futures of Tribal Nations and Native communities while preparing Native youth to lead in ways that are grounded, practical, and community-centric.

Our future is young. Our present is sovereign. Our foundation is Native. CNAY is building pathways for future Indigenous leaders grounded in sovereignty, self-determination, culture, and community responsibility. Let us continue to invest in their leadership, celebrate their power, and provide the tools they need to build the future they envision. Thank you for reading this report and for your interest. There is no tomorrow without our youth.

Yaw^ko & Mvto (with deep gratitude and thanks),

TRACY L. CANARD GOODLUCK
Oneida Nation & Mvskoke (Creek)
Executive Director, CNAY







Letter from the Youth Advisory Board

As this report and tracer study showcase, the power of CNAY lies in its ability to connect youth and build collective power for future generations. Those who have been through CNAY programs, like all of us on the Youth Advisory Board, know this from experience.

When Native youth find each other, they find proof that they are not alone in carrying the hopes and dreams of their communities. The initial connections, friends and relationships found through CNAY programs become a network of support, creativity and shared purpose that lasts well beyond any single event or program.

For Indigenous youth, our dreams are often sidelined by some in the generations that precede us. Our visions, they tell us, are too lofty to hold ourselves, too unrealistic to be implemented, too idealistic for a pessimistic world. But for CNAY, the dreams of young people are the answers that our communities have needed for generations – restoring ancestral foodways, revitalizing languages, increasing positive representation through art and media, and changing policies from a time that has passed.

These visions and goals are not far-off ideas. They are real work being led by Indigenous youth today.

CNAY reminds youth that leadership is about a collective responsibility to the land, waterways, and communities that encircle us. This type of leadership is rooted in the teachings of our ancestors, who thought in terms of generations, not individual recognition. As Indigenous peoples, our power comes from our culture, a strength and grounding that can never be taken away from us. Instead, it is a component of our existence that has always been, and will always remain, with us.

Our hopes and dreams build the future we desperately need. It cannot be postponed by a day, a year, or a decade. Future building happens today – planned, envisioned and carried out by Native youth everywhere.

CNAY grounds us in our culture, reminds us of our power, and charges us to dream about a better future, and build it for the generations that will follow.

– 2026 Youth Advisory Board Executive Committee

KATIE LYNCH
Citizen Potawatomi Nation
Chair

JOSHUA CHING
Kanaka ʻŌiwi & Uchinānchu
Vice Chair

TAYLER HIGGINS
Yup'ik, Dena'ina & Suqpiaq
Secretary

Letter from the Founder

I founded the Center for Native American Youth in 2011, shortly after retiring from the United States Senate. I spent 30 years in the U.S. House and U.S. Senate. When I chaired the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs from 2007 to 2011 I focused heavily on problems confronting Native children, particularly the extraordinarily high rates of youth suicide in Tribal communities.

There are two great stains on America's behavior since our beginning - slavery and our treatment of those who were here first. The stain continues today. I believed, and still believe, that our country has a responsibility to keep the promises we made to the First Americans. With that belief in mind, I donated $1 million of my unused campaign funds to establish the Center at the Aspen Institute.

I, along with Allison Binney, Erin Bailey, Sarah Garland among others, had a vision that CNAY would address these obligations of this country. Today, Tracy and the CNAY team continue this work. We are improving and saving the lives of Native American children.

CNAY was founded to address teen suicide prevention, education, safety, and creating new opportunities for Native American youth through transformative leadership programs. The organization has evolved considerably since 2011. Rather than simply advocating for Native youth, **CNAY now works alongside Native young people, giving them opportunities to lead and speak for themselves.**

One of the most important things about the Center is that it tries to connect three worlds that don't always interact effectively: **Native young people and Tribal communities; national policymakers and institutions; and organizations that can provide resources and opportunities.**

From the beginning, the idea was also to give Native youth a stronger **national platform**. CNAY has brought young Native leaders into policy discussions and media settings so they can describe their experiences in their own voices rather than having others speak for them.

Along with the dedicated Advisory Board, I intend to continue the good work we started 15 years ago alongside the CNAY staff well into the future and continue to find ways to work alongside Native youth to improve their lives.



SENATOR BYRON DORGAN
North Dakota United States representative (1981 - 1992), United States Senator (1992 - 2011)
Founder, CNAY



Acknowledgements

Without the vision and leadership of Senator Bryon Dorgan, Allison Binney, Sarah Garland and Erin Bailey, the Center for Native American Youth wouldn't exist. We are grateful for their belief in this organization to uplift and center the voices and expertise of Native youth across this country. We are grateful to all of those who have served as Executive Directors of the Center for Native American Youth over the past 15 years, including Erin Baily, Erik Stegman and Nikki Santos. Our work is guided by the wisdom and trust of our Advisory Board members.

We are grateful to the leadership and support of the Aspen Institute, including former CEOs Walter Isaacson and Dan Porterfield, as well as advocates and leaders like Elliot Gerson, Daniel Baussan, Kaya Henderson and Pete Weber. The incredible work that CNAY does every day isn't possible without the amazing staff, both past and present, who join this organization with a deep belief in the limitless potential and wisdom of our youth.

We are honored to have been guided and supported by Native trailblazers like Jodi Archambault, Raina Thiele, Alison Grigonis, Tracy Goodluck, and Deb Haaland, who helped establish noteworthy initiatives like the Generation Indigenous (Gen-I) Network and believed in the importance of a White House Tribal Youth Summit. Additionally, the CNAY Advisory Board who have guided our work over the years. We are deeply grateful for their commitment and support of the organization.

All of us are here today to support the voices, vision and futures of Native youth. We want to acknowledge and honor all the youth and alumni who have come through our programs and especially recognize the contributions of the CNAY Youth Advisory Board past and present, who have played a role in shaping the current and future direction of CNAY.

This work would not have been possible without the thoughtful contributions and expertise of the consultants who supported the development, implementation and analysis of the survey and focus groups, Dr. Jerreed Ivanich and Cheyenne Brady. We also acknowledge Katy Stewart for managing this project from start to finish and synthesizing the analysis into this thoughtful report.

We are especially grateful to the Wellspring Philanthropic Fund for providing the support to produce our 15 year impact study.

As an organization grounded in Indigenous values, we remind ourselves daily of our responsibility to our past, present and future. We are here today because of the leadership of our ancestors. We honor the elders who ground us and we stand proudly with the youth who will lead us forward.

About CNAY

The Center for Native American Youth (CNAY) at the Aspen Institute is a national leadership development, education and advocacy organization that works alongside Native youth—ages 24 and under—on reservations, rural, villages and urban spaces across the country to improve their health, safety, and overall well-being. All Native youth deserve to lead full and healthy lives, have equal access to opportunity, and draw strength from Native culture.

CNAY believes Native youth are powerful leaders today and essential to advancing the sovereignty of their Nations and communities. Through leadership development, research, advocacy, storytelling, civic engagement, and convening, we create platforms for young people to shape solutions and influence systems affecting their lives.

Through culturally-competent hands-on trainings and technical assistance, Champions for Change, and other fellowships and initiatives, CNAY continues to elevate Native youth voices and build networks of Native youth leaders in service of community.



Our Mission

Centered on sovereignty and self-determination, our mission at the Center for Native American Youth- as a leadership development, education and advocacy organization- is to improve the health, safety and overall well-being of Native American Youth.

Our Vision

Rooted in culture and identity, our vision is for all Native American youth to lead full and healthy lives, be honored for the leaders they are, and have resources and agency to create the world Native youth are worthy of and deserve.

Our North Star: Sovereignty and Self-Determination

We believe sovereignty to mean the inherent authority of Indigenous people to govern their nations grounded in traditions, knowledge and obligation to one another. Through self-determination we exercise that inherent authority through the daily living practice of decision making, Nation-building, and culture. All of which must include Native youth.

Aspen Institute

The Aspen Institute is an educational and policy studies organization based in Washington, D.C. Its mission is to drive change through dialogue, leadership, and action to help solve the greatest challenges of our time. In addition to the Washington, DC office, The Institute has campuses in Aspen Colorado (Ute territory) and New York (Munsee Lenapee). The Aspen Institute and its international partners ignite human potential to build understanding and create new possibilities for a better world.



Core Values

Guided by Indigenous teachings, these values reflect how we treat each other and show up each day to meet the mission & vision of CNAY. We are here with a purpose set in motion by our ancestors seven generations ago. It is our responsibility to continue the good work for the next seven generations.

Identity & Culture

Identity & Culture provide a sense of belonging & purpose, grounding us in a framework from which to make purposeful decisions & interact with our communities. Identity & Culture provide us with strength, vision & confidence to carry out our responsibilities.

Respect

It is important to **Respect** yourself first, so you can pass it on to all beings. Respect means being kind, courteous & listening with an open heart & mind. It means holding yourself accountable for your actions & how you treat others.

Relationships

We are all **Related** & connected. Our actions & decisions are informed by the Relationships we have with one another. They way we care for & hold each other accountable comes from the Relationships we nurture amongst ourselves & Mother Earth.

Responsibility

As relatives, we have a **Responsibility** to one another to be a good relative. We are Responsible to our people- past, present & those yet to be born. This means we must be intentional about our behaviors, actions & treatment of one another. We hold each other accountable. We support, uplift & guide others.

Community

We are members of our CNAY **Community**, our larger communities & Tribal Nations. This means we have a responsibility to be a contributing member to make our Communities stronger & better for the collective whole.

Humility

We won't always have the answers, so it is important to be **Humble**. We are open to learning, growing, change and honesty amongst ourselves & with our communities.



"CNAY has been one of the most formative experiences and opportunities that I've had in my life. It's led me into the legal profession where I now serve Tribes and Villages across Alaska and throughout the United States. It has given me the tools that I use in my day-to-day life as a Tribal member and an advocate for Tribal priorities."

SAM SCHIMMEL
2020 Champion for Change
Kenaitze & St. Lawrence Island Siberian Yupik



CNAY History + Timeline

CNAY was founded with a vision to improve the lives of Native children across the United States. **For more information on our programs, please see page 41.**

CNAY began as an organization heavily focused on listening to the needs of young people and relaying those needs and concerns to policy makers at all levels, primarily through policy roundtables held with Federal agencies, Tribes, youth serving organizations and Native youth. Along the way, we recognized that Native youth had powerful and transformative ideas and messages to share directly with policymakers. We began to pair our advocacy work with direct leadership training so that Native youth could begin to tell their stories to advocate for the changes they felt were most pressing for their communities.

In 15 years time, CNAY has become a nationally recognized organization - working alongside the White House through several administrations to uplift the voices of Native youth in federal policy spaces and serving as a key partner on several major national surveys.



CNAY is Founded

Champions for Change Program Launched



CNAY serves as key partner for the first ever White House Tribal Youth Summit. The White House announces partnership with CNAY to drive participation for the Gen-I Initiative.



First State of Native Youth report released



CNAY establishes the Youth Advisory Board and launches new leadership initiatives: Creative Native, Community Champs Programs in North and South Dakota, Movement Builders Fellowship



Remembering Our Sisters Fellowship Launches

CNAY launches the California Native Youth Collective



CNAY Youth Advisory Board authors NCAI Resolution



2011 2012 2013 2014 2015 2016 2017 2018 2019 2020 2021 2022 2023 2024 2025 2026

2011– 2013

70 Roundtables Held on topics ranging from Sequestration & Indian Country, to Public-Private Partnerships, to suicide prevention in South Dakota and Indian Child Welfare.



President Barack Obama announces Generation Indigenous (Gen-I) Initiative at the White House Tribal National Conference after visiting Standing Rock Indian Nation

Native Youth Count report published

CNAY hosts 36 roundtables throughout Indian Country



CNAY launches Democracy is Indigenous and partners with other Native organizations on the Indigenous Future Survey - the first survey about Indigenous people, for Indigenous people in the United States

CNAY launches the Brave Heart and Building Communities of Hope Fellowships



CenterUs Report published

15 Year Anniversary

Alumni Demographics + Impact Numbers

10,000
YOUTH SERVED

146
TRIBAL AFFILIATIONS

$540,000
REGRANTED DIRECTLY TO YOUTH



5747
GEN-I AMBASSADORS

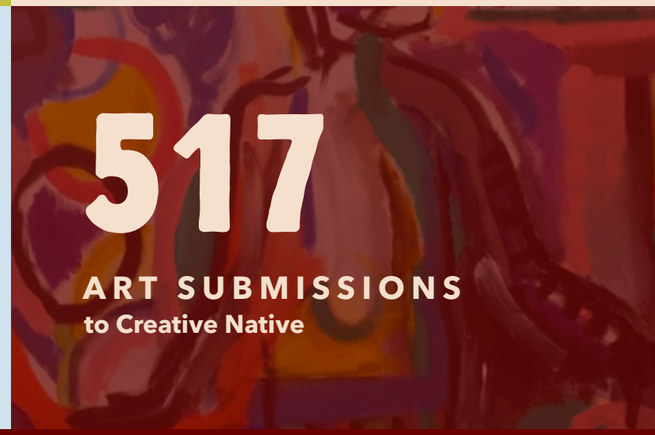
26
STATES REPRESENTED

6
TRIBAL YOUTH SUMMITS
with over 1000 youth attendees

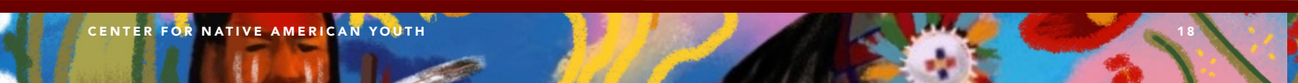
171
ROUNDTABLES

5198
ROUNDTABLE ATTENDEES

13
REPORTS PUBLISHED



517
ART SUBMISSIONS
to Creative Native





Major Wins

Setting National Policy Priorities

The CNAY Youth Advisory Board wrote a resolution that was unanimously passed by the National Congress of American Indians in 2025. The resolution called for greater youth representation in leadership positions across Tribal Nations, NCAI and other national organizations.



Storytelling to Drive Change

Ignacio Taylor was a 2023 California Native Youth Collective (CNYC) Ambassador. Ignacio came to the program with a deep desire to transform the foster care system in California, a system that he had spent his childhood navigating.

As a CNYC Fellow, Ignacio had the opportunity to meet with CA State Legislators as well as attend the White House Tribal Youth Summit. Ignacio shared that CNAY provided him confidence and a belief in himself to advocate for changes that he wants to see. During his Fellowship year, Ignacio testified in front of the Sacramento City Council supporting a measure to provide guaranteed basic income for foster youth. The measure was approved and foster youth aging out of the system in the city are now eligible for monthly payments to help them afford rent, food and other expenses. Ignacio thanks CNAY with instilling him with confidence to lead with his voice to inspire change.

Harnessing Power through Confidence Building

Veronica Krupnick was a 2022 Building Communities of Hope Fellow. Veronica shares that when she found CNAY, she was already doing advocacy work but she was often "the only Indigenous person in the room".

Veronica says that "for the first time in her advocacy career, she felt both so seen and so held" when she joined CNAY. After her time in the program, Veronica played an important role establishing the Indian Family Protection Act "IFPA", New Mexico's counterpart to the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA).

"I will be forever grateful to CNAY for giving me the tools, knowledge and network to become the leader I was always supposed to be."

Advocating for Change Using Research

CNAY played an integral role in the development of the Native Children's Commission Implementation Act, which was introduced to the US Senate in 2026.

In 2012, CNAY held dozens of focus groups with Native youth, tribal leaders and federal agencies. The focus groups helped to build the case for the Alyce Spotted Bear and Walter Soboleff Commission on Native Children Act that was passed in 2016. The Act ultimately led to The Way Forward Report of the Alyce Spotted Bear and Walter Soboleff Commission on Native Children, which makes comprehensive recommendations for programs, grants and services available for Native youth. Numerous CNAY fellows and leadership provided testimony and input that shaped the recommendations. In 2026, five CNAY alumni spoke in Washington DC in support of the Native Children's Commission Implementation Act which would provide funding to bring the Way Forward's recommendation to fruition.

Our Impact: 15 Year Tracer Study

Over the course of twelve months, CNAY set out to understand our legacy: what impact does our programming have on the youth who participate in it?

We analyzed our most intensive programmatic efforts over the years and contacted **141 alumni** to participate in an alumni survey. We received **101 responses** (72% response rate) and conducted focus groups with **36** of those alumni. The data we collected and the stories we heard showcase the enduring power of CNAY to transform the lives of Native youth.

Youth in CNAY's program consistently gained confidence, leadership skills, community and a feeling of well-being after participating in our fellowship programs. The support, trust and safety that Fellows gained through CNAY-supported networks has proven to be a key stepping stone in the lives of our fellows.

Fellows consistently mentioned three things when talking about the impact of CNAY on their leadership journeys and lives: they felt safe, supported, and worthy. Culturally-centered programming and cohorts of other Indigenous youth helped them feel supported and validated in their leadership journeys and fostered connections that helped support their overall wellbeing.



"CNAY - what you need, we can give it to you and we can make it happen. I haven't seen organizations replicate these touch points. CNAY meets the needs of youth - whatever they are."

SAMUEL HIRATSUKA | 2023 CHAMPION FOR CHANGE
Unangax̂, Yup'ik, Winnemem Wintu & Navajo

"I believe CNAY is one of the strongest Native youth programs to have ever existed. Its ability to bring together some of the most powerful Native youth from across the country is something I have not seen replicated elsewhere."

ANAGALI DUNCAN | 2024 CALIFORNIA NATIVE YOUTH COLLECTIVE AMBASSADOR
Cherokee Nation

"One thing I am taking away from this wonderful experience is confidence. Seeing other of my people in their beautiful traditional outfits representing their cultures made me comfortable. I am more confident in wearing my traditional outfit which now makes me unique in my own way as a person and to represent my people and Ancestors."

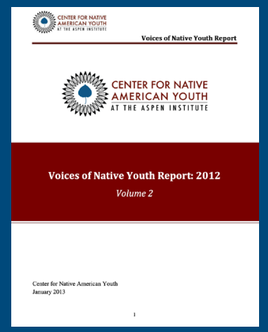
2022 WHITE HOUSE TRIBAL YOUTH SUMMIT YOUTH PARTICIPANT

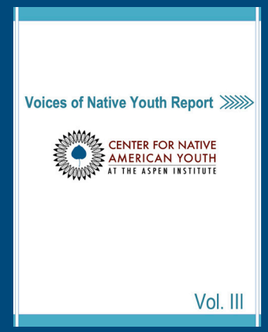
Our Research

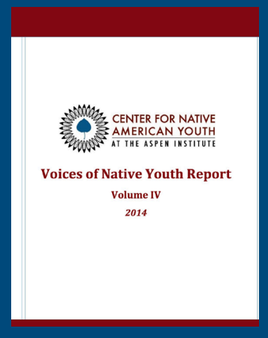
The Center for Native American Youth (CNAY) recognizes the power of data. Our research prioritizes Indigenous best-practices and assures broad access to accurate data that reflects the collective thoughts, opinions, experiences and needs of Native youth from across the country. Native youth are at the forefront of CNAY's datawork by identifying what information needs to be collected, aiding in data collection strategies, participating in qualitative and quantitative methodologies, and interpreting data. It is our hope that through continued participation in data collection, Native youth can help ensure data sovereignty for their communities. CNAY's data work is an invaluable step towards uplifting Native youth voices and paving the way for the future they deserve.

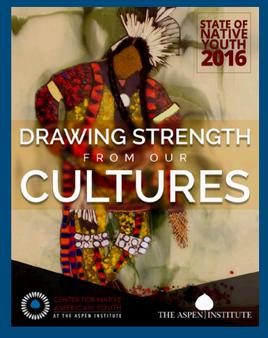


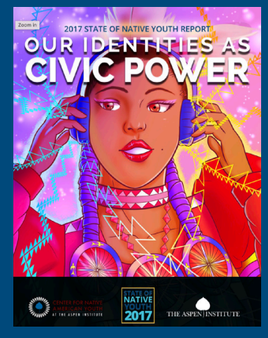




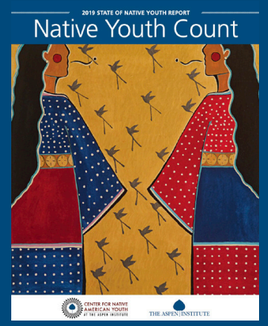


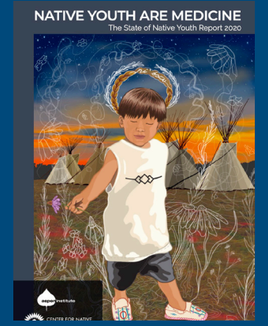




















Lessons Learned

Based on the stories and data we collected, there are four primary lessons we've learned about the strength of CNAY programs.

#1. CNAY serves as a long-term leadership and relationship-building network.

91% of alumni say that CNAY enhanced their leadership skills. Participants consistently described CNAY as more than a single program experience. Alumni reported sustained peer relationships, mentorship connections, professional collaborations, and ongoing engagement years after participation. Many youth expressed the confidence that they gained from being in spaces and places they never would have had the opportunity to access otherwise. CNAY made the inaccessible accessible. **CNAY brought over 1,000 youth to six White House Tribal Youth Summits (WHTYS).** Alumni reported the power of these Summits - sitting in the same room as Cabinet Secretaries and White House staff - all of whom were there to listen to the ideas, suggestions and hopes of Native youth. By providing access to events like the WHTYS, CNAY affirms that Native youth deserve, and need to be in these spaces, for the betterment of our collective future.

> **"CNAY was such a big push for me to be more in the advocacy space, especially getting the opportunity to attend the UN. I want my work to be more meaningful than just working in tech and continuing involvement with the community and bringing Indigenous perspectives into tech/AI spaces."**
>
> GISELLE ALVAREZ | 2025 BRAVE HEART FELLOW



#2. CNAY's impact extends beyond educational and career outcomes.

Respondents identified strengthened cultural identity, belonging, leadership confidence, purpose, and community connection as among the most meaningful outcomes of involvement. **89% said their well-being and connection to Native communities increased because of CNAY.** With investment from Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, CNAY conducted a two year study on Indigenous leadership and subsequently developed a novel Indigenous Leadership Framework which has been the cornerstone for our Fellowship curriculum. Similar to the four directions and the four stages of life upheld in Indigenous belief systems, four pillars uphold the Indigenous Leadership Framework. These pillars have been found via Indigenous research to effectively enhance and empower Indigenous leadership. One of the pillars is culture and spirituality. By incorporating and responding to Native spiritual and cultural belief systems, we provide a culturally supportive environment for our Fellows. W**e know that cultural connection is crucial to the leadership development of Native youth: youth who feel culturally educated are four times more likely to see themselves as capable of making a difference than those who do not.**

> **"CNAY gave me the mentorship, tools, friendships, family connections, cultural empowerment, sense of belonging, and light that taught me my life, passions, culture, identity, leadership, and goals are all that I need."**
>
> ROXY SPROWL | 2023 BUILDING COMMUNITIES OF HOPE

#3. Alumni view CNAY as a turning point for them.

Many participants characterized CNAY as life-changing and foundational to their personal, educational, and leadership journeys. CNAY puts Native youth in spaces and places they wouldn't be otherwise. Alumni in our programs have credited CNAY as either the spark that led them into their career path or the fire that kept them going. Joree LaFrance, a 2018 Movement Builder Fellow, started a nonprofit on the Crow Reservation, after being inspired by the hope, confidence and support that her CNAY fellowship instilled in her. She wants to bring the same opportunities to young people in Montana. Ian Teller, a 2024 Champion for Change, was motivated to pivot his career and journey from the music industry to politics after finding CNAY and he is now running for an Arizona state house seat. Tia Butler, a 2024 Brave Heart Fellow, shared that she got an established role with her Tribe as the Food Sovereignty Program Assistant, as a direct result of her work with CNAY.

> **"During the fellowship, my project was centered around Food Sovereignty and reintroducing traditional plants/medicines in the community. I now have established a role, and serve my Tribe as the Food Sovereignty Program Assistant. It has been so beautiful to be able to reconnect community members to our traditional lifeways and teachings. CNAY has been the most impactful organization to work with, as it has provided knowledge, connections and resources that are beneficial and pertain to my work. The support I have received through CNAY has helped put me in the position I am in today, and I will forever be grateful for the experience."**
>
> TIA BUTLER | 2024 BRAVE HEART FELLOW
> Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians

LESSONS LEARNED (CONTINUED)

#4. CNAY successfully fosters sustainable, trusting and long-lasting connections and relationships.

81% of CNAY alumni report maintaining connections with 3 or more peers from their CNAY experience. Nearly half of alumni speak to their CNAY peers monthly with **85% staying connected** to their peers a few times a year. Importantly, we don't see a major decrease in the frequency of connections with time. **40% of fellows** from the first seven years of programming reported communicating with their peers at least once per year, compared with **45% of Fellows** from the most recent seven years. The consistency of connection over the years points to the enduring relationships created through CNAY programming.

Social connection is vital to long-term wellbeing. As psychologist and researcher Dr. Jeff Duncan-Andrade puts it, "we are well when we feel seen, valued and connected to others". Thosh Collins and Chelsea Lugar emphasize the importance of community in their now popular Indigenous model for living well, The Seven Circles. Through intentional and authentic relationship building, CNAY supports the development of long-lasting connections and relationships that support Fellows well after their fellowship year. **80% of alumni** say that CNAY provided a supportive community. Participants talked about the culture, community, safety and support created by CNAY through programming and staff mentorship. These factors helped youth build confidence which in turn led to other professional, academic and community successes for them. Integral to this is the fact that CNAY creates a safe space for Native youth - our programs are culturally grounded and centered on Indigenous values. Youth enter our spaces without having to explain themselves, and just show up as themselves.

> **"CNAY is more than an organization. It's a family, a community, and a true catalyst for change. When I first became involved, I was searching for a space where I felt seen, valued, and heard. CNAY gave me that and so much more. For me, CNAY was the spark that set everything in motion."**
>
> **JARRETTE WERK | 2018 MOVEMENT BUILDER**
> Aaniiih and Nakoda Tribes of the Fort Belknap Indian Community



"Kids having face to face conversations with elected officials and the White House. We did that standing ten toes strong in our moccasins and our ribbon skirts."

JARRETTE WERK
2018 Movement Builder
Aaniiih and Nakoda Tribes of the Fort Belknap Indian Community



Three Types of Enduring Connections

We asked alumni about: the number of connections created through CNAY, the frequency of communication with those connections and the support received through these connections. Notably, alumni point to three types of support they received over time through the CNAY network: #1 Personal, #2 Professional, #3 Collaboration on a Project or Advocacy.



#1. Personal

73% of alumni gained personal, emotional or cultural support

"My connections with my cohort (sisters) have been the best experience with CNAY. I was able to make long lasting friendships. These connections have taught me so much. As we all come from a different background. My cohort was able to share their true selves to me and I was able to finally show my true self to the world. As I started off in my cohort at a confusing part of my life. They showed me their love and caring nature towards me. I finally came out as a Trans-Woman and showed them my vulnerability. They accepted me with open arms. *ƛ̓ig*ʷ*itubuɬəd* (thank you)."

FABIAN MENDOZA | 2025 REMEMBERING OUR SISTERS FELLOW
Muckleshoot Indian Tribe

#2. Professional

60% of alumni gained career or educational support

"The CNAY connection I had helped me with my career and education by reminding me I was important, and that what I was doing mattered. As a student at New York University, it can feel easy to fall into the mix of always trying to prove yourself, always trying to be the best, and getting lost in the hustle and bustle of living in the city. Through CNAY, I felt like I was able to slow down and be supported in a way I didn't even realize I needed. Validation that the career I was seeking mattered, that my efforts were not going unnoticed, and a reminder how special it was I was able to get a master's degree fully paid for. CNAY helped me feel proud again, helped me feel whole again, and helped me remember why I was pursuing my career choice and education - for myself, my family, and my community."

CARRIE JOHNSON | 2025 REMEMBERING OUR SISTERS FELLOW
Chickasaw & Pawnee

#3. Collaboration on Project/Advocacy

63% of alumni gained project collaboration or advocacy support

"Through CNAY, I have built meaningful relationships with Native youth leaders and advocates across the country. These connections have opened doors for me to participate in national advocacy efforts, including advocating for the Commission on Native Children Implementation Act and engaging with congressional leaders on issues impacting Native youth."

TAYLER HIGGINS | 2024 CHAMPION FOR CHANGE AND 2026 YOUTH ADVISORY BOARD SECRETARY
Yup'ik, Dena'ina & Suqpiaq

How We Increase Youth Mental Health Wellbeing

Youth have everything they need to lead, they just need the resources, agency and belief to do so. That is what we provide at CNAY. Established psychological research shows that hope is an important protective factor against suicide ideation in youth and adolescents.

Specifically, hope drives marked increases in overall wellbeing in adolescents. As an organization dedicated to improving the wellbeing of Native youth, understanding how our work contributes to hopefulness is an important marker of our ability to improve overall mental health wellbeing.

C.R. Snyder's Hope Triad provides a helpful model for understanding how our work – and the lessons uncovered through our tracer study – contribute to youth wellbeing. The three components of the Hope Triad are **goals** (knowing where you want to go and having the ability to set realistic targets), **pathways** (knowing how to get there) and **agency** (believing in yourself and having the perseverance to say, 'I can do this').

CNAY's approach overlays Snyder's Hope Triad in important ways: we think of goals as **vision**. We work with youth to set achievable goals on their journey to envisioning a better future, whether those goals are part of a policy agenda or through a funded project. We foster environments that uplift Indigenous knowledge- highlighting the **pathways** that exist within Native youth already. And we focus on **agency** - developing confidence, responsibility and awareness- as the first step towards collective action. Native youth must develop agency to believe in their power and ability to protect, respect and uphold Tribal sovereignty through self-determination. Developing agency requires understanding the responsibility Native youth have to their communities present and future.

The Hope Triad through CNAY Programming



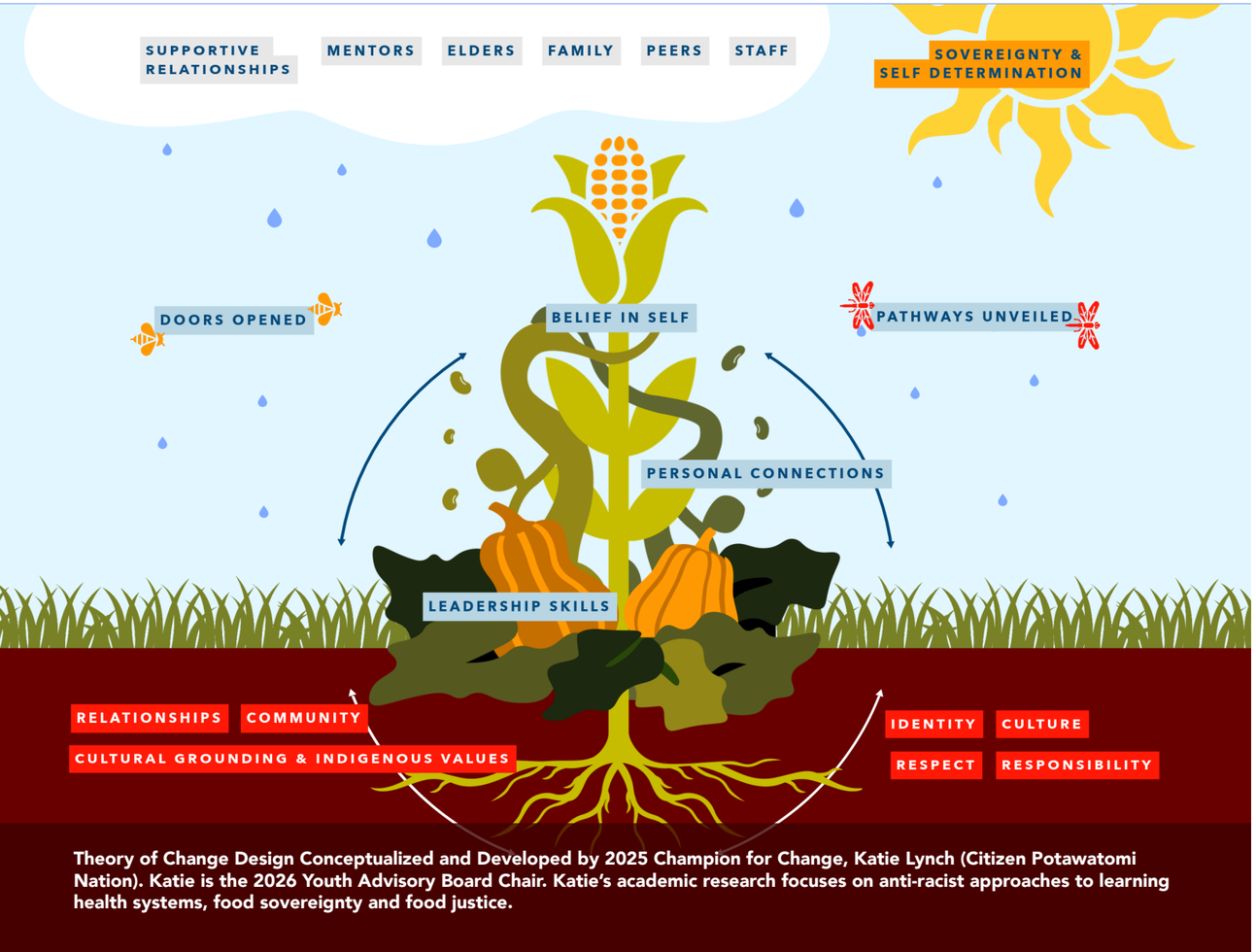


Our Theory of Change

CNAY creates an ecosystem that supports the development of confident, connected and resourced Native youth who are equipped to lead their communities and Nations. We do this in important and interconnected ways.

Indigenous value systems aren't linear or hierarchical. CNAY's theory of change reflects the interconnected relationship of the Three Sisters: corn, beans and squash. These three crops are inseparable, living gifts from Creator that sustain life and teach humanity how to live in harmony with nature.

By providing cultural connection and skill-building opportunities through our programming, youth build confidence in themselves and in their ability to make change in their communities. This confidence leads to action, and action leads to improved health and wellbeing outcomes for all.



Theory of Change Design Conceptualized and Developed by 2025 Champion for Change, Katie Lynch (Citizen Potawatomi Nation). Katie is the 2026 Youth Advisory Board Chair. Katie's academic research focuses on anti-racist approaches to learning health systems, food sovereignty and food justice.

#1. Guided by Sovereignty and Self-Determination

Sovereignty and self-determination are our organization's conceptual North star and the sunshine that allows everything to prosper. To successfully grow crops, we must understand our sunlight. Without the sun, nothing grows. Here at CNAY, we have a duty to ensure that all Native youth understand their inherent sovereignty and self-determination. As citizens and descendants of Tribal Nations in the United States and Indigenous peoples beyond colonial borders, upholding sovereignty is foundational to the long-term survival of our communities, our Nations and our well-being.

#2. Grounded in Indigenous Knowledge and Value Systems

Nothing can grow without nutrient-rich soil. The soil that supports the growth of Native youth at CNAY are the Indigenous knowledge and value systems that underpin our leadership philosophy and that guide our lives as an Indigenous-led organization. These values are universal across Indigenous communities and help define our worldview: a holistic framework that respects and upholds our deep relational connections to each other, the Earth and all living things.

#3. Nurtured through supportive relationships

Without the consistent fall of rain, plants cannot thrive. At CNAY, we make sure that our Fellows are consistently supported by a network of connections: mentors, peers, elders, staff and their families. We recognize the important role that others play in our leadership journey and that connections and support are vital to the long-term wellbeing of our youth and our leaders.

#4. Activated by opportunities

Just as pollinators keep ecosystems healthy and active by making connections and preventing isolation, our job as CNAY is to bring Native youth into spaces and places they've never been. By making connections with policymakers and decisionmakers, by amplifying youth voices in the halls of Congress and at the White House, by helping youth foster connections and ideas at the United Nations, we're providing the pathways through which Native youth can take their advocacy efforts. This is a critical element of the work we do. Youth in our programs don't often see Native representation in National places of power. We provide the reminder and the connections to tell them that their voices are needed to advance positive change for communities across the country.

Together, the factors nurtured and supported by CNAY lead to Native youth in our programming developing strong **confidence and a belief in-self, feeling supported through personal connections, and developing lifelong leadership skills** that collectively work together to not only promote long-term internal wellbeing, but that enable them to become lifelong leaders for their communities.

The Future

Our tracer study work and this report share what we know to be true - our model of leadership development to advance the health and wellbeing of Native youth works.

Evidence of the connections built over time and the ripple effect of change that Fellows are having on their communities - from running for public office, to starting a leadership nonprofit to having the confidence to continue their advocacy work - show that when organizations build programming that center the needs of Indigenous youth, we help support the development of confident and driven leaders.

For the next 15 years and beyond, CNAY will strengthen and build on what works.

We will work to continue to provide space for Native youth to build solidarity and partnership with peers and mentors while also providing them with Indigenous leadership models and sovereignty-centered programming.

Our leadership programs center Native youth voices, power, and cultural identity. They are designed to shift the narrative from one of hopelessness and helplessness to one of healing, agency, and leadership. Our goal is to cultivate a generation of Native youth leaders who are equipped to influence systems change at the national, Tribal, state, and local levels. By investing in culturally responsive solutions that center Tribal sovereignty, we ensure that Native youth are not just surviving systems - they are leading the transformation of them in service of current and future generations.



Recommendations

While the tracer study has been an effective evaluation tool to glean insights on the arc of CNAY's impact and the successes of our alumni, we feel that our methodologies and learnings should not be limited to the youth that we are able to serve. Greater investment in Native youth is necessary on all levels and culturally-grounded programming like CNAY is critical for the future of Indian Country.

After 15 years of programming focused on improving the health and wellbeing of Native youth, we have identified five critical recommendations for organizations, institutions of higher learning, state, and Tribal Nations seeking to advance the wellbeing of young people. At the core of each recommendation is a commitment to meaningfully engage youth as thought partners and decision-makers.

#1. Culturally-grounded programming is the starting place for all Native youth programming

We have developed an Indigenous Framework for Leadership Development that guides all of our programming. Important to this is an understanding that centering Indigenous knowledge, ways of being and cultural understanding drives a feeling of belonging for youth in our programs. These efforts aren't secondary to our leadership model, they are the bedrock of the model.

Recommendation: Youth serving organizations should ground their curriculum in culture and identity building.

#2. Nothing for us without us

CNAY's work was initially focused on highlevel roundtable discussions to share the needs of Native youth with policymakers. While these roundtables and policy agenda setting conversation remain critical, we now know that they cannot happen without youth at the table. Over our 15 years, we've shifted our model to not just listen to Native youth, but to amplify their messages and ideas directly. Native youth are already leading today and we need to create the spaces and places for them to do so fully. Over the years, we've heard directly from youth that opportunities such as the White House Tribal Youth Summit or visits to Capitol Hill have been transformational. These opportunities would not exist without CNAY's investment and show youth that they belong in these spaces.

Recommendation: Organizations and Tribes should include youth in the spaces where decisions are being made and give them meaningful opportunity to share their ideas, views, and voices.

#3. Intentional programming requires youth to feel seen, heard and valued

We allow room for youth to show up authentically and we tailor our support to youth to meet them where they are at. We also provide funding directly to youth to carry their work forward, through microgrants and by also funding travel to attend CNAY events. By providing funding, we remove barriers that otherwise might exist for a number of the youth we seek to serve.

Recommendation: Youth programming should include investments in Native youth: the tools, emotional support, and resources, particularly funding, they need to thrive.

#4. Youth programming must center on confidence building

Building confidence in oneself as a leader requires being seen, heard and valued by adults, mentors, elders and peers. Based on stories from alumni, we know that one of the primary internal tools that CNAY provided our Fellows is a belief in self and confidence. These internal feelings allowed Fellows to pursue their dreams of advocacy and leadership in ways they didn't think possible.

Recommendation: Youth program design should center confidence building: create intentional opportunities for Native youth to strengthen their self-esteem so they can envision a future where they are leading.

#5. Connected relationships are essential

Using a model described by Dr. Jeff Duncan-Andrade, we are deeply committed to building trusting and connected relationships as opposed to supporting institutional relationships. Institutional relationships are formal, aiming to meet the needs of youth, manage behavior and ensure compliance with sets of expectations. Connected relationships center Indigenous values - they are relational, reciprocal, grounded in trust and empathy and express genuine concern for the whole person. Connected relationships lead to individual and community wellness.

Recommendation: Youth programs should intentionally model connected relationships between fellows, mentors and staff to make a meaningful impact.

Photography and Art Citations

Front Cover

Top Row: Credit of Art of Cover: Quahada Burgess (Comanche Nation), Sikyuva Dawavendewa (Hopi), Yazzie Chee (Diné), Deja Gallegos (Navajo)

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Forth Row: Noelle C Z (Gun Lame Potawatomi, Saginaw Chippewa Tribe of Michigan), Oona Benally (Navajo), Xatimniim Drake (Karuk Tribe), Aiyana Beaulieu (Red Lake Band of Chippewa)

Inner Pages

Footer Throughout: Nizhoni Toledo (Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation)

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Page 10: Evynn Richardson (Haliwa-Saponi, Kiowa)

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CNAY Program Key

Champions for Change
CNAY's flagship leadership development program.

White House Tribal Youth Summit
A one-day convening co-hosted by CNAY that connected Native American, Alaska Native and Indigenous youth leaders directly with federal administration officials, Cabinet members, and Tribal leaders.

Generation Indigenous.
A U.S. Federal initiative launched by President Barack Obama to empower Native American, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian youth. CNAY ran the Native Youth Network, an online portal that connected youth to resources and leadership tools.

Creative Native
An annual call for art open to Native youth ages 5 - 24.

Community Champs
Modeled after the Champions for Change Program, the Community Champs program brings hands-on leadership training directly to local reservations.

Movement Builders Fellowship
A one-time six-month leadership development program designed to strengthen the voices and roles of Native youth in broader social justice movements.

Democracy is Indigenous
An Initiative design to support civic engagement efforts through microgrant funding and tailored trainings.

Remembering Our Sisters Fellowship
A storytelling and arts program that empower young Indigenous women and femme-identify leaders to raise awareness and honors those affected by the MMIWG2S+ epidemic.

California Native Youth Collective
A network of Native youth leaders from across the state of California working to advocate for their communities at the local and state levels.

Brave Heart Fellowship
A program to equip Native youth with advocacy skills to protect traditional lands, waterways and sacred sites.

Building Communities of Hope
A program to raise awareness and advocate for change in the foster care system.


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