

# LONGMONT NONPROFIT GIVES AMERICAN INDIANS A HELPING HAND

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The Oglala Sioux had buffalo. Grass-fed, traditional, lean buffalo.

Loneman Elementary School in Kyle, S.D., had cheeseburgers, pizza, the usual school-food suspects. The school wanted the buffalo.

It had all the earmarks of a win-win situation. Except that about a million federal and state regulations about slaughterhouses and food safety threatened to keep the tribe's bison from ever riding the forks of Loneman students.

That is, until First Nations Development Institute swooped in with cash and a plan to save the day. First Nations, based in Longmont, is one of the oldest, and possibly the largest, philanthropic organization dedicated to improving the lives of American Indians.

Yet even its president acknowledges a lot of people have never heard of it. "We are a well-kept secret even among people in Indian country," First Nations president Mike Roberts said.

First Nations was born 30 years ago, in Virginia, because that's where its founders happened to live, Roberts said. Eventually, its leaders decided the organization should, like most of the country's American Indians, live in the West. So, five years ago, First Nations moved to Longmont. The organization doesn't have a huge endowment, so it must get grants, mainly from private groups, in order to make grants, Roberts said.



*Reviving healthy eating. Sophomore Muriel King and senior Allie Spruce learn to make traditional cornbread at the Oneida Nation High School. Below, the Oglala Sioux tribe in South Dakota raises buffalo on the Pine Ridge reservation. First Nations has helped both.*

"Other foundations give us money to give out," he said. The money they give goes to bolstering Indians' education, health care and economic development. Native American Food Systems Initiative, one of First Nations' programs, does most of that simultaneously. "When you're looking at 10 or 20 thousand people all spending 30 percent of their money on food — there is an opportunity for enterprise," Roberts said. There is a need for enterprise too. On South Dakota's Pine Ridge reservation, per capita income in 2000 was less than a quarter of that among the rest of the state's residents.

In 2010, a \$25,000 grant helped the Sioux get bison into a school. The same year, Arizona's Tohono O'odham also got \$25,000 to help revive production of traditional foods. Another \$25,000 grant to South Dakota's Harvest Initiative helped agricultural entrepreneurs on the Crew Creek Sioux Reservation. And a fourth \$25,000 grant helped the Oneida Nation in Wisconsin provide modern canning equipment that enables members to preserve their own food, and supported a program that teaches teenage girls how to grow and process food.



*Shane Brown and Jerry Blanks load an Oglala Sioux buffalo onto the Wild Idea Buffalo Co.' mobile slaughtering unit. A grant from Longmont-based First Nations helped the South Dakota tribe work with Wild Idea, a commercial buffalo grower, to avoid having to drive buffalo 90 miles away to slaughter.*

Tohono O'odham Community Action.

Last year, when ABC-TV reporters visited the Pine Ridge Subway, an employee recalled that one woman practically wept at the store's opening in 2008, overcome by the sight of fresh lettuce and tomatoes chopped and beckoning in metal sandwich-assembly-line bins.

### **Tears for fresh produce**

The term food deserts may be synonymous with decaying urban cities, but a family trying to find healthy food on a remote corner of the Navajo nation faces no less a challenge than one in a rough corner of Newark. The Tohono O'odham reservation is bigger than Connecticut. Yet on its entire sun-parched expanse there is only one supermarket, said Tristan Reader, co-director and co-founder of

The tangle of bureaucracy, designed to safeguard kids' health, can create barriers to putting locally grown food on cafeteria tables in any school. On a reservation, issues of sovereignty and isolation grow that tangle to a thicket.

And, if you're talking about slaughtering animals, that's a whole other level of headache. Trudy Ecoffey, a biologist for the Oglala Sioux Parks and Recreation Authority, said regulations had forced the tribe to truck its buffalo 90 miles to Rapid City to be slaughtered, then drive it back. Technically, as a sovereign nation, the tribe didn't have to abide by federal and state regulations. "But for everybody's protection, we decided we'd play by their rules," she said. The First Nations grant helped them pay a local firm to bring a mobile slaughtering unit to them. The tribe's recreation authority also is putting finishing touches on a walk-in cooler and freezer to store meat longer.

The tribe's 800 buffalo, which munch on grass and get no antibiotics or vaccines, don't make money for the Oglala Sioux. They do link a community often swept up in modern turmoil with its cultural past.



### **Reviving healthier past**

Buffalo meat again is a part of sun dance ceremonies, funerals and naming ceremonies, Ecoffey said.

*The Ogalala Sioux tribe in southwest South Dakota raise their own buffalo on the Pine Ridge reservation. A grant from Longmont-based First Nations helped them move slaughtering and processing to the reservation rather than moving the animals 90 miles to Rapid City.*

"Fifteen or 20 years ago, people didn't like buffalo because they thought it tasted different," she said. Now, even the kids are getting used to it.

A similar scenario is playing out among the Tohono O'odham. "In 1960, no one here had Type 2 diabetes," Reader said. "Now, it's more than half the population." Until the 1930s, the tribe cultivated "the fastest-maturing corn in the world" and the tepary bean, evolved to thrive beneath sizzling skies, on about 20,000 acres. Farming began to dwindle when the tribe's men went off to serve in World War II, and that continued when the federal government shipped kids to urban boarding schools, at the same time providing alien commodities, like white flour, milk and sugar.

By 1999, only about 5 reservation acres were farmed, Reader said. When agriculture vanished, it took more than the tribe's health, he said. "So much of the Tohono O'odham culture is agriculture ceremonies ... all that went into decline."

Two years ago, the tribe's Community Action started a pilot program to bring those foods back. Now more than 1,000 kids have a "traditional food option" at school once a week, Reader said. "A lot of those foods were lost for a generation," he said. This generation though, seems ready to rediscover much that has been lost, even as growing numbers of Native and non-Native people look for healthier diets.

The timing is working in First Nation's favor.

The past several months have been exciting around the nonprofit's Coffman Street headquarters, as grants have come from groups including AARP and the Wal-Mart Foundation. "It's been an interesting month-and-a-half watching dollars flow in," Roberts said. "We don't usually have that problem," he said.