



Youth *in action*

August 2001

NUMBER 07

OJJDP

FACT SHEET

United National Indian Tribal Youth, Inc.

by Yumi Sagiri

United National Indian Tribal Youth, Inc. (UNITY) is a non-profit, national network organization promoting personal development, citizenship, and leadership among American Indian/Alaska Native youth. An outgrowth of an American Indian education project in southwestern Oklahoma, UNITY began as a small group in 1976 and has expanded to a nationwide organization that today reaches more than 50,000 American Indian/Alaska Native youth.

UNITY's mission is to foster the spiritual, mental, physical, and social development of American Indian/Alaska Native youth and to help build a strong, unified, and self-reliant Native America through greater youth involvement. Underpinning the UNITY philosophy is the belief that the most effective way to bring about positive and lasting change among American Indian/Alaska Native youth is to prepare them to become

informed and contributing members of their tribes, villages, communities, States, and Nation. UNITY reaches these youth through a variety of programs and activities, including national and regional leadership conferences, training seminars, awareness campaigns, multimedia publications, and sports clinics.

Background

UNITY's inception wasn't planned; it simply evolved from a series of American Indian programs directed by J.R. Cook. After a successful basketball coaching career, Cook spent a decade working with the Upward Bound project at Southwestern Oklahoma State University in Weatherford, OK. Cook felt that American Indian youth had more negative than positive influences in their lives and more reasons to fail than to succeed.

Aware of the tremendous waste of talent among American Indian youth and the negative

peer pressure that surrounded them, Cook saw a need for an organization that would help these youth use their talents in a positive way. In the mid-1970s, he began working with the Weatherford community to purchase and renovate the building that housed the Southwestern Indian Cultural Center. The center received an Indian Education Dropout Prevention and Cultural Retention grant from the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (now Health and Human Services) to work with American Indian youth in 10 public schools in western Oklahoma.

The project was very successful. One outcome was that the young participants exhibited a marked increase in self-esteem. When Cook approached the youth about taking the necessary steps to expand the program to regional and national levels, they gave their enthusiastic support. On April 16, 1976, UNITY was incorporated

as a nonprofit organization in Oklahoma; in 1978, it relocated its headquarters from Weatherford to Oklahoma City. UNITY is governed by a 10-member council of trustees, whose members (all of whom are American Indian) include 5 young professionals who were former UNITY members.

An early milestone for UNITY youth came at the 1980 National UNITY Conference in Great Falls, MT. Participants wrote a “Declaration for Independence,” in which they pledged to take charge of their destiny by becoming involved in the organization’s decisionmaking process and promoting economic development (i.e., self-sufficiency and sustainability).

Youth Councils

UNITY has succeeded in working with American Indian/Alaska Native youth through the development of youth councils—local groups of youth ages 15 to 24 who come together for a common purpose. The youth councils, which are sponsored by tribes, Alaska Native villages, high schools, colleges, and urban organizations, can vary in size from a few members to hundreds of members.

Through the councils, youth learn leadership skills while helping others in their communities, tribes, or villages. Youth councils are involved in a wide range of activities, such as cultural preservation, environmental awareness, community service, and promotion of healthy lifestyles. Involvement in a council helps youth develop self-esteem and confidence through support and encouragement from their peers. They also learn how to organize and conduct meetings, use parliamentary procedure, plan events or programs, coordinate community service projects, and work with community, tribal, and village leaders.

The UNITY Network

Members of more than 220 youth councils in 34 States are committed to making a difference in their communities. The UNITY Network includes all youth councils and provides a forum for communication and sharing of information. It ties all the youth councils together and teaches council members how to develop productive contacts within their communities and with other youth leaders throughout the country. Benefits of joining the UNITY Network include

leadership training opportunities, representation on the National UNITY Council, access to the UNITY News electronic newsletter, and opportunities to meet youth leaders from across the country, elected officials, and key decisionmakers at the national level.

It costs \$25 for a youth council to join the UNITY Network. Individual youth who don’t belong to a youth council can join for \$5.

For Further Information

For more information on UNITY and its programs, contact:

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YFS-00107

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U.S. Department of Justice
Office of Justice Programs
Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention
Washington, DC 20531
Official Business
Penalty for Private Use \$300

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