

Community-Based Philanthropy: *Coming Together in a Circle of Inclusion and Strength*

The four Native American leaders, two men and two women, danced to the rhythms of the Indian song, accompanied by the steady background beat of a drum. Each held a corner of an open blanket, and they danced steadily around a circle of watching people. One by one, the mesmerized audience members stepped out of their circle, moved to the blanket, and dropped in cash and checks. A lot of cash and many checks. This was the time-honored Blanket Dance, a treasured Native American tradition. It also is an example of community-based philanthropy.

When most people think of “philanthropy,” they envision extremely high-wealth individuals, with names like Carnegie, Rockefeller, or today’s Bill Gates. Or they may think of large national entities like the Ford Foundation or the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. They don’t usually think of their aunt, their neighbor, or their child’s day care provider. But this is a mistake, because philanthropy—and the potential for it—exists at every level of American life.

The National Rural Funders Collaborative (NRFC) is now funding initiatives with farm workers in Salinas Valley, low-income communities in the Mid-South Delta, and tribal communities in Montana and Wyoming – focusing on community transformation. One of the key strategies NRFC is funding is community-based philanthropic strategies among communities of color. This work, to create culturally appropriate philanthropic models, has been supported especially by Lumina Foundation and other funders participating in the NRFC.

The Native American community has been engaged in informal philanthropy for thousands of years. In the Pacific Northwest, Indian tribes practice various forms of a “potlatch,” a festive ceremony held in honor of births, rites of passage, weddings, funerals, and other occasions. The host family gives away food, blankets, and other goods, winning respect and recognition in exchange, with the emphasis placed on the giving and redistribution of resources. The Midwest or Plains tribes have “give-aways” to settle an estate, celebrate the naming of a child, or to mark other milestones, when families give gifts to be recycled into the community. The Blanket Dance often is used to raise funds for a family or an individual in need.

Giving Circles

Similarly, the giving and sharing of resources has been a core value and a long-held tradition for the African American community. Darryl Lester, president of Hindsight Consulting, in Raleigh, NC, recognized the potential in this informal giving, and knew it could be put to work in building and strengthening rural communities. Formerly the Director of Programs at Triangle Community Foundation, he wanted to develop a collective-giving model that could maximize the time, talents and treasure of the African American community. With a supporting grant from the Ford Foundation, Darryl held a series of focus groups with young, African American adults throughout the South. His research resulted in the formation of two giving circles—one in the Triangle region of North Carolina (Raleigh, Durham and Chapel Hill), and one in Birmingham, Alabama, and eventually the establishment of the Community Investment Network, in 2005.

“A giving circle is a way for individuals to pool their resources to make a difference in their communities,” says Darryl. “It’s an old concept—seniors and elders recognize this—it was a way to take care of other people, and a way to give back.” The circle members each contribute a set minimum amount of money on an annual basis—the Triangle region giving circle started with a minimum contribution of \$150 each—and they then decide, as a group, how their pooled funds should be re-granted.

The circle concept is one that can involve a wide variety of people, and participation is not limited to those who have substantial disposal income. “The rural way is to take care of each other,” Darryl explains. “Rural communities are built on relationships – it’s the rural way of life. This is a collective model. Folks may not have large resources, but they can pool what they have with

others to make a bigger ripple. We are demystifying what institutional philanthropy is, and engaging ordinary people and people of color into the giving movement. Also, we have found that as people come together to actively lead with their time, talent and money, they begin to be invited to sit at the table of other local interests. So, it also provides civic engagement and power-sharing opportunities.”

Athan Lindsay, associate director of the National Rural Funders Collaborative (NRFC), who helped to start the first North Carolina giving circle, describes the circles as a community problem-solving strategy. “Before, philanthropy was seen as far out of reach by people who are poor. But, if it is a tool that is used by people from outside the community to create change within the community, why can’t people of color do it for themselves? Too often we don’t require anything of those who get, to give back. If we are working to create wealth, then what does that wealth produce in terms of giving back? How can you leverage your resources?”

Giving Circles and Community Investment Network

There are now nine giving circles in the South, in North Carolina, Alabama, Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Louisiana, and they come together once each year at the annual Community Investment Network (CIN) conference. The conference provides an opportunity for circle members to learn from their peers and share their experiences. In 2006, the conference was expanded to include other interested attendees.

Of last year’s 150 CIN conference attendees, four were Native Americans. Dr. Johnel Barcus, executive director of the Browning Community Development Corporation, on the Blackfeet Reservation in Montana, discovered a number of commonalities with other attendees, who were predominately African Americans. Cultural poverty, and the importance of family and spirituality were among their shared reference points.

Giving circles were, of course, a key topic at the conference, and those new to the concept were taught procedures for initiating a circle in their own community. When Johnel returned to Montana, and met with her board of directors, she enthusiastically described the conference learnings and the giving circle strategy. Her board decided to start a circle themselves, acting as the CDC board, and to use this as a trial for 2007. Each board member currently is contributing at least \$20 per month, and will use the money as a “match” for other resources, hoping to eventually expand the giving circle into the community and use it to establish a revolving loan fund for area businesses.

Carrie Day Aspinwall, formerly the membership and program coordinator for Native Americans in Philanthropy, and now a member of the grant-writing team for the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe, in Minnesota, was another of the Native American participants at the CIN conference. She found the largely African American group to be very welcoming and open. “Communities of color, and rural communities, have been taking care of themselves for a long time,” says Carrie. “Coming together is what’s difficult.” She especially enjoyed talking with the African American elders who were at the conference and found many connections between African American and Native American cultures and traditions. “Where there is a need, there’s a way to take care of it. If we can come together, there is nothing we can’t do.”

Circle of Leadership

Back in Minnesota, one of Carrie’s responsibilities at Native Americans in Philanthropy was to work with their Circle of Leadership. This was a program to identify and teach young Native American leaders and expose them to the field of philanthropy, with hopes that they would take those skills back and implement philanthropic strategies in their own communities. The program was an 18-month pilot project, involving nine individuals selected through an application process. Among other activities, the class worked to develop an Emerging Leaders Summit to be held as part of the Native Philanthropy Institute in April 2007. The event gathered Native people from

across the United States to learn about formalized giving, fundraising, communications and leadership. One of the sessions at the Institute, presented by NRFC, was on giving circles.

The Institute and Leadership Summit culminated in a graduation ceremony for the nine Circle of Leadership participants, and ended with the Blanket Dance described earlier. While the class president sang a traditional Native song, the blanket was carried by his dancing classmates, and the crowd happily caught the spirit, digging deep into their pockets and purses, contributing more than \$1500. As they had planned, the young Leaders contributed their collection to the Fund of the Sacred Circle, managed by the Headwaters Foundation for Justice in Minneapolis. The money will be leveraged with philanthropic funds, matching the dollars one-for-one. One of the Circle of Leaders will sit on the grantee review team and help make decisions on which projects to fund. The Fund of the Sacred Circle makes grants of \$50,000 to \$100,000 each year.

The Blanket Dance at the closing ceremony “is the epitome of philanthropy,” Carrie points out. “People knew the Circle Leaders and knew their money was going to a good cause. This now will give them the opportunity to sit at the table, help make decisions about where the money is going, and feel good about the distribution at the end.”

Community Giving and Institutional Philanthropy

Linetta Gilbert, senior program officer with the Ford Foundation, and a member of NRFC's Steering Committee, has funded First Nations Development Institute for several years. First Nations is a Native American policy, research, grantmaking and lending institution. She has been encouraging First Nations to become involved in Native communities at the ground level. Linetta is a strong proponent of community-based philanthropy and the long-term impact it can have on poverty, race and equity issues. She thinks the work of Hindsight Consulting and the growth of giving circles—which Ford has supported—is critical, in that it has begun to draw in people who have been underrepresented in philanthropy.

“This advances not just the conversation about race and equity, but also strategies to build communities,” says Linetta. “The involvement helps people assure themselves they are already donors, and it helps to heal the gaps...(it's important) to not just have people at the table, but there must be mutual respect, and they must be included in creating the solutions. Identifying their giving as important to the community can make a difference. New voices are getting involved in philanthropy at the level at which they can come in.”

Joy Persall, executive director of Native Americans in Philanthropy, also sees the connection between fledgling community efforts and institutional philanthropy. “It's powerful to see people get organized around their own funds and put their strength behind that,” she says. “We hope to hook Native community-based philanthropy with other mainstream institutions and build partnerships that can lead to exciting change.”

Two examples of existing funds within institutional philanthropic organizations are the Two-Feathers Fund, located within the St. Paul Foundation, and the American Indian Family Empowerment Program, at the Minneapolis Community Foundation.

The Indian Land Tenure Foundation, in Minnesota, also operates as a community foundation. They are integrating grantmaking with development activities. Their grantees are tribal entities who are involved in land planning and learning strategies to deal with the loss of Indian lands. Jo-Anne Stately, vice president of development, points out that institutional foundation grants to tribal nations are very low: only 1/20 of one percent of available funding goes to Indian-defined groups. And tribal gaming, which is now 15 years old, has not solved the problem of poverty in Native American communities.

(Only 224 of the 562 Native American tribes have gaming operations, and many have limited offerings and are located in low-traffic areas. Although some tribes have prospered due to

gaming, most revenues are still directed to support infrastructure, health and social services where federal funding falls short. It also has contributed to increased tensions around issues of sovereignty, states' rights versus federal authority, and inter-tribal disputes about gaming and economic development.)

Jo-Anne does, however, think there is great promise in raising funds at the community level, through the creation of new models for what philanthropy can be. "There can be a new paradigm, one that can shift how people think about philanthropy," she says. "The Hopi Education Endowment Fund was just created, with \$10 million to start it. This is not a gaming tribe. The funds were part of their operating funds. This was a significant contribution. The money will stay within the community and individuals can contribute too."

Recognition is steadily growing about the potential for community-based philanthropy, mainstream institutional philanthropy, and government, to work together on the tough issues of poverty, race and equity. Recently Montana Governor Brian Schweitzer has designated Native American representation on his Governor's Task Force on Endowment and Philanthropy. And the Council on Foundations' August meeting in Montana will feature a site visit to the Blackfeet Reservation.

Johne Barcus is excited about the potential for community-based philanthropy to provide a boon to their community and a connection to other resources. "Here on the Blackfeet Reservation, we are in a family-level survival mode," she says. "There is high poverty and high unemployment, but things are happening now. The Indian community has been dependent on the government for survival, but when we can start giving people what mainstream America considers their right, and have the resources without having to rely on others, then we can reach for the American Dream like anyone else."

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