
THANKSGIVING, A TIME TO REMEMBER NATIVE AMERICANS



The celebration of Thanksgiving is different for everyone. Some gather with friends and neighbors for a meal and reflection of gratitude while others travel to be with loved ones.

Unfortunately, the abundance of food and merriment is not always the reality for Native Americans living on some of the most remote and impoverished reservations.



In fact, Native Americans suffer the highest need in the U.S., and food insecurity impacts one in four Native American families. Individuals that reside in rural or geographically isolated communities that lack access to fresh fruits and vegetables are often left without nourishing meals on a regular basis.

While food security is a daily struggle, it can be more acutely felt around Thanksgiving when much of America is sharing in a meal of plenty.

[Partnership With Native Americans](#) (PWNA) receives thousands of requests annually for Thanksgiving meals and in 2016, the nonprofit served more than 38,000 people in the Northern Plains and Southwest. PWNA works with its program partners to deliver healthy foods to remote reservation communities and serve Thanksgiving meals to Elders and families – either through community-wide meals prepared by reservation partners and their local volunteers or family meal bags distributed to individual Elders for a Thanksgiving meal at home with their families.

Thanksgiving for Native American Elders

“Our holiday tradition was the meal and it would take three days from start to finish – the longer it took, the better it tasted!”

— Sara Fills The Pipe, Pine Ridge Reservation



[Sara Fills The Pipe](#) is a Native American Elder from the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. She regularly visits the Oglala Elderly Meal Center to receive a warm meal and enjoy the company of other Elders in her community.

- Food insecurity impacts nearly 1 in 4 Native American families.
- About 35 percent of Native American children are growing up in impoverishment.
- According to the most recent Federal Census, 58.7% of the grandparents on the Pine Ridge Reservation are responsible for raising their own grandchildren.
- Many elderly on the reservations PWNA serves are living on a fixed income of social security.
- Native Americans have the highest prevalence of type 2 diabetes in the world, and much of this is due to a lack of access to healthy, nutritious food.

Sara recalls the years spent preparing meals for Thanksgiving and other family gatherings. “Our holiday tradition was the meal and it would take three days from start to finish – the longer it took, the better it tasted!” said Sara. As a family, Sara and her husband prepared “turkey, ham, menudo, chitterlings and hog maws, candied yams, collard greens, corn, acorn squash with butter, sugar and cinnamon, sweet potato pie and egg custard pie.”

Though she no longer cooks to celebrate Thanksgiving, Sara recognizes it as a time to give gratitude while surrounded by loved ones, including her five adult children, grandchildren and great grandchildren.

Sara also recognizes the holiday itself is conflicting for some Native Americans and made sure to teach her children and grandchildren about the origins of the first Thanksgiving – why the holiday was started and what it means to some tribes and Native peoples. “I tell them, you listen to the Indian version and then you’ll understand why some people don’t celebrate [Thanksgiving].”



The Real Story of the First Thanksgiving

Sara alludes to the idea that many of us think we know what happened at that first Thanksgiving. The story commonly told is that pilgrims and Indians sat down for a meal to share their cultures and celebrate the harvest. In truth, the pilgrim story was invented and the national Thanksgiving holiday proclaimed for political reasons. Specifically, Abraham Lincoln declared a national day of "Thanksgiving" when the 13 colonies joined together over victory of the British in 1777. Lincoln's theme of pilgrims and Indians sharing a meal was intended to serve as a story of unity in order to calm people in strife over the Civil War.

Pilgrims first arrived in America in 1620, seeking religious freedom and sanctuary from the persecution and hardship they encountered in their homelands. They arrived on Cape Cod (not Plymouth Rock) seeking corn and beans

grown by Native Americans. While it's true that the pilgrims would not have survived their first harvest at Plymouth Colony without the assistance of Squanto, their response to the tribes was not as gracious. In return for the charity and compassion shown to the pilgrims, the tribes were confronted with military action, the taking of land and systematic oppression.

This is why some say Thanksgiving is celebrated at the expense of Native peoples, and while America celebrates a day of thanks with feasts and football, based on the pilgrim tale, many Native Americans continue to face disparities and economic hardships. In fact, for many tribes, Thanksgiving marks the National Day of Mourning that honors the death of Native Americans at the hands of early settlers and colonists and shines a light on realities facing Native Americans today.



You Are Invited

While we cannot change history, knowing the truth about history can change us. Many reservation partners and participants like Sara choose to utilize Thanksgiving as a day when they can bring their communities or families together, gathered around a healthy meal. For the rest of us, Thanksgiving brings the opportunity to remember Native Americans and the disparities and economic hardships many Native families continue to face daily.

PWNA invites you to join in its commitment to support a positive Thanksgiving and improve quality of life on the reservations it serves. Even the smallest monetary gift or bulk in-kind donation can help bring families together to enjoy a healthy meal on Thanksgiving, and throughout the year. Learn more about what you can do at www.nativepartnership.org and our program sites at www.npraprogram.org and www.swraprogram.org.

Contact us

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