

Blue Skye Self Reliance

Blue Skye & Growing Self-Reliance

- Helen Oliff, National Relief Charities

It was a big change moving back to the Standing Rock Reservation. When I lived in Phoenix, I had access. It was convenient just to go down the street and get whatever I needed. But when I moved back here, we found ourselves having to drive an hour or so to the border towns like Bismarck, ND or Mobridge, SD to do our grocery shopping. We spent a lot of time, energy, and money doing that because there isn't a lot of local shopping here. There's a fast food place and Quick Stops where you get gas and a quick snack. Fresh, locally grown produce just wasn't available... but that was 10 years ago. This is changing now. ~ Aubrey Skye ~

Aubrey Skye is proud of his heritage as an enrolled member of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe. For some years he attended boarding school and lived in Phoenix, but ultimately he felt the call to return home to the Standing Rock.

Good things are happening on this land that spans the North Dakota-South Dakota borders. Aubrey works for the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe's Diabetes Program and is helping in the fight against diabetes.

In 2002, a study on hunger in Indian country found malnutrition and diet-related chronic diseases in American Indians on the rise – meaning that some or all nutritional elements necessary for health were missing from the diet (International Relief & Development, aka IRD). In 2005, the Center for Disease Control reported that two counties on the Standing Rock had the highest diagnosed rate of diabetes among adults 20 and older. In 2008, the Journal of Nutrition reported that not having access to nutritious food (aka “food insecurity”) directly translates into poor nutrition and diets lacking in vitamins, minerals, fruits, vegetables, grains and meats. “Although many Americans may not know it, in fact, malnutrition on reservations is comparable to malnutrition in some developing countries.” (IRD)



Aubrey understands just how much the Native American diet has changed and how, as far back as the 1950s, they began to see the onset of type II diabetes among Native communities. "It was all due to the change in our diet."

This is why, for two years running, Aubrey took on a huge garden project for the reservation, as the Diabetes Program's Native Gardens Project Coordinator. Over 130 families on the reservation wanted to raise a garden. Through AIRC Project Grow, their gardens were tilled and a variety of seeds, including traditional seeds, were provided to get their gardens started! Aubrey

was first introduced to gardening and agriculture through his stepmother's family. They grew organic crops, but didn't call it "organic" back then.



Each year, they burned off the weeds, because the ash added nutrients to the soil. Aubrey followed the tractor to sow the seeds and cover a row at a time.

It paid off every year.

For Aubrey, "this garden project is a holistic approach in the prevention and treatment of type II diabetes in our communities on the Standing Rock." He adds: "The project is creating awareness of the benefits to having fresh produce on a rural reservation that really doesn't have access to this type of food. Aubrey, the SRST Diabetes Program, and the AIRC Grow project are raising awareness about the health benefits of the traditional foods that our people have depended on for generations."

Coordinating the tilling of 130+ gardens is no small task on Standing Rock. The reservation is wide. There are many miles to be driven to get from point A to point B. Locating the homes for the garden plots is also tricky. "It's like... turn left at the telephone pole, go two miles to the end of the field and take a right, and go a mile and a half and you'll see a trailer out there." This is what Aubrey has to go by, but it's easier each year as they become more familiar with the families and the homes.

Aubrey Skye coordinates the tilling with the families and the support from AIRC (American Indian Relief Council), a program of National Relief Charities (NRC). "AIRC provides the equipment and the fuel for the tilling, the seeds, and some manpower" to help us till over 130 gardens in a week's time... just in time for the planting season. Aubrey helps with the tilling too. "It's really good to see all the services that AIRC and NRC provide, and if it wasn't for their donors, we wouldn't be able to carry out a lot of the objectives that we have."

Aubrey's garden project is working on many levels. Gardening was a big deal back in the 1930s to 1940s before the Army Corps of Engineers built dams and flooded the Missouri River bottom where Standing Rock's people lived. This forced the tribe to move further back on the prairie. The soil, Aubrey explains, is basically a buffalo range, all grassland, but gardening can be done and the people here are interested in growing crops.

A big motivator for the gardens, aside from the health benefits, is self-sufficiency.



Although root cellars disappeared from most American households centuries ago, the people of Standing Rock are now using them to store fresh vegetables, potatoes and other crops into the winter months. "This reduces our dependence on commodities and gives our families a way to provide for their own basic needs."

Aubrey also sees that the Elders are passing on. The gardens are a way to get them involved. They also give Elders an opportunity to share

with youth and other relatives. "They have the knowledge and seem to be always willing to talk about their experiences. This helps all of us."

In addition to the garden project, Aubrey, the SRST Diabetes Program, and the CDC Native Diabetes Wellness Program are encouraging tribal members to eat wild edible foods and to vend these foods at the 3 Farmer's Markets on the reservation. Native Americans once made their living and got all of their sustenance from game and wild foods. Modern day raw foodists believe that wild edible foods are the most vital of all foods and can't learn enough about them! Aubrey says, "These are "traditional foods" that we used to eat all the time." They grow abundantly on the reservation and provide a sustainable source of variety in the diet. Examples are the tinsula (edible wild turnips), choke cherries, buffalo berries, wild currants, gooseberries, wild turnips, and more.

"What we are working toward are ways to be more self-reliant and more green," says Aubrey. The whole point of our garden project with AIRC is to provide locally grown foods to tribal members so they have access to healthy foods. "The garden project is motivating our people. We're going to do it again this year, and hopefully, we'll have continued success with the garden vegetables, the farmer's markets, and our return to traditional foods. These are all stepping stones in our fight against diabetes."

Aubrey Skye is the Native Gardens Project Coordinator for the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe's Diabetes Program.

For more information about AIRC, a program of National Relief Charities, visit www.nrcprograms.org. To contact the author, send an email to PR@nrc1.org