

Growing a Strong Community

The Community Investment Projects of Partnership With Native Americans (PWNA) support initiatives and concerns identified by PWNA’s reservation partners. One example is that PWNA and tribal communities are working together to combat low food security by encouraging homegrown food sources to decrease nutrition-related diseases.

As a whole, the rate of food insecurity among Native American communities is higher than for the general population in the U.S. The International Relief and Development commissioned a study to examine the “double burden” of poverty:

“malnutrition along with a rapid rise in obesity and diet-related chronic diseases in American Indians. Although many Americans may not know it, malnutrition on reservations is comparable to malnutrition in some developing countries.”ⁱ

When PWNA met John Yellow Hawk several years ago, he was a volunteer at the PWNA-supported youth garden project in Kyle, South Dakota, a Pine Ridge community. After losing his wife, he needed a project that would draw on his natural talents and redirect his energy toward helping others. Eager to support an activity with the potential to change habits and lives, the people involved with the Kyle community garden project welcomed John with open arms and literally handed him the tools — shovels, spade and tillers — he needed to work through his grief.

The proficiency to grow and harvest food, particularly potatoes, has been handed down from grandfather to father to son. John was particularly proud of this intergenerational skill. He recalled working in a potato field south of the reservation during his youth. “Hand picking and carrying 100-pound gunny sacks was not easy,” but John admitted, “we made good money and it made us stronger.”



Generosity is a Lakota value that John embraced wholeheartedly

Generosity also made John strong – it is a Lakota value he embraces wholeheartedly. So, when PWNA asked John to teach gardening classes, he shared his knowledge of gardening with beginners and his knowledge of soil, bugs and weather as it relates to gardening on Pine Ridge.

After pursuing a grant and a loan from the Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI), John expanded his food production in hopes that the excess harvest would be sold at farmers markets. A good steward of the land, PWNA provided John with garden tilling, seeds, tools and most recently, a chicken coop.

Johns’ bountiful harvest moved him from “gardener to grower” and tribal members purchased his produce at local and mobile farmers markets across the Pine Ridge Reservation. The income from his



John at the Oyate Teca community garden in Kyle, SD (Pine Ridge)

produce enabled John to repay the loan, and the produce from his garden expanded the nutritional food choices available to other community members in this food desert. According to the USDA, a rural community is a food desertⁱⁱ if a third of its population is 10 miles or more from a large grocery store. Kyle is 20 miles away.

PWNA was honored to share in John's journey to help grow a strong community. Growing your own healthy food is a good foundation for a healthy mind and body and a solid investment in food sovereignty. *(2016 update: We were saddened to hear that John passed away in June 2016. We will always remember his goodness, gift for gardening and the contribution he made to his community.)*

ⁱ America's Forgotten First -- Malnutrition among American Indian Populations. International Relief and Development. Published at http://ird.convio.net/site/PageServer?pagename=April_2008

ⁱⁱ USDA Defines Food Deserts. American Nutrition Association, Volume 37, No. 2. Published at <http://americannutritionassociation.org/newsletter/usda-defines-food-deserts>