



UNITED NATIVES

Summary

INTRODUCTION: MEETING NEW CHALLENGES

In 2010, while working on her doctoral dissertation in Public Health, Dr. Crystal Lee (of the Dine/Navajo tribe) launched United Natives, an online mentoring program designed specifically for Native American college students. Aimed at uniting career with culture, this program pairs undergraduates with Native faculty or working professionals who help them resolve academic, social, and personal issues that may be interfering with their self-development and education. Originally started with nothing more than the money in her pocket, this project has grown and now offers mentees opportunities to participate in meaningful civic engagement, social action, leadership, and cultural awareness activities. Plans to expand the program to all school-aged youth are currently being assessed.

Once a small grass-roots group focused primarily on mentoring, United Natives has since “spread its wings” to become an even stronger, more action-driven organization. Since the outbreak of the coronavirus in 2020, it has been out front providing relief efforts to the Navajo Nation and neighboring tribal communities. To date, United Natives has distributed over \$1.5 million in critically needed supplies to Native American communities in Arizona, including Phoenix area, White Mountain Apache Nation, Navajo Nation and Hopi Nation. In partnership with Dr. Michelle Tom, a Dine/Navajo Family Medicine physician who practices near the Navajo Nation. In addition, United Natives also became a Native-led, intertribal quarantine site for virus-positive Native Americans in Arizona. Lastly, United Natives has opened up a mental/behavioral health facility in Mesa, AZ, Phoenix, AZ and Las Vegas, NV that provides direct services. This alliance of “can do” community partners is fully committed to meeting the distinctive challenges of Indian Country so fiercely impacted by the pandemic.

Ironically, it is because of this unprecedented crisis that long standing disparities in public infrastructure and health care, prevalent for generations among Indigenous populations, was exposed. Understanding the vulnerability of their own communities, tribal leaders, Native-based medical practitioners, and non-profits (like United Natives) banded together to find novel, yet effective, ways to mitigate some of the deadly impacts of the virus. Innovations at the local level have been encouraging with valuable lessons learned on how to safely move forward. Eager to continue and expand on a number of action plans put in place during the height of the pandemic, United Natives is dedicated to ensuring the sustainability of these programs by formally “stepping up” its own role as an advocate for Indigenous peoples. Consequently, the organization is looking for resources to support its recently opened behavioral health center, an offshoot of the quarantine site, as well as to help fund an outpatient clinic to be located in southern Nevada (and housed at the Las Vegas Indian Center). Monies to further grow other culturally-centered wellness and family strengthening programs are also being sought. Fortunately, United Natives is well positioned to meet these new challenges given:

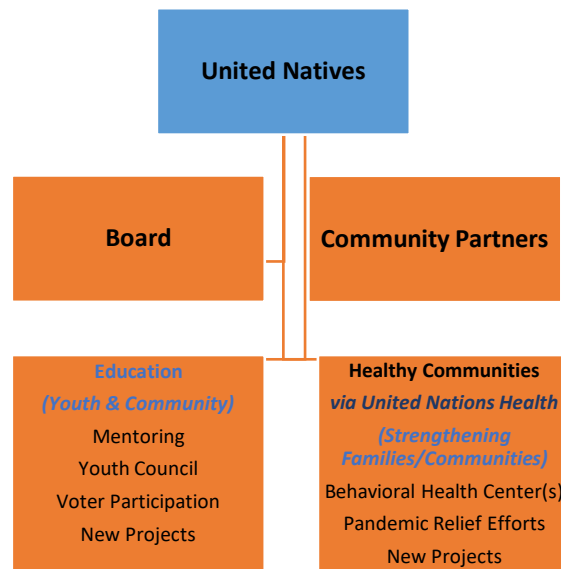
- its 4-year track record as a Native-led non-profit
- the extraordinary insights gained while providing COVID-19 relief efforts and the strong coalitions formed during the apex of the crisis
- the remarkable leadership of its Director, Dr. Crystal Lee, who 1) holds a PhD in Public Health, 2) is currently engaged in biomedical research with an emphasis on Native American wellness, and 3) recently acquired a Masters of Legal Studies in Indigenous Peoples Law from the University of Oklahoma
- the diversity and strength of its Board of Directors

- its solid network of dedicated volunteers, public and private partners, and local sponsors

At the heart of United Natives is the desire to honor the cultural identity of Indigenous peoples while advancing their standing in the larger (American) society. By closing the institutionalized disparity gaps (economic, social, political, medical, and educational) that have existed for generations, it is hoped that a healing of the Native spirit can begin in earnest.

PROGRAMS: BUILDING A LASTING FOUNDATION

United Natives currently focuses on two strategic service areas. The first, **Education**, is youth-driven and includes the mentoring program as well as the youth council. **Healthy Communities**, *coordinated through United Nations Health*, is the second and delivers behavioral health services along with other initiatives aimed at strengthening families and tribal communities.



EDUCATION

- **Mentoring: Uniting Career and Culture**

While colleges and universities in the United States have long struggled to recruit and retain Native American students, to date this group still has the lowest college enrollment and graduation rates of any other in the nation. In 2017, less than one-fifth of Native American and Alaska Native students ages 18-24 were enrolled in college, and such students made up less than one percent of total admissions. Of those who do matriculate, only 39 percent graduate within six years.

To increase access to postsecondary education, institutions of higher learning must recognize and respond to the unique cultural values and stressors common among Indigenous students. For example, Native American students are more likely to have graduated from underperforming high schools impacting their readiness to achieve academically. Additionally, many are first-generation students with greater financial need. Some are disenchanted with institutional approaches that exclude and dismiss

Native American history. Others confront stereotypes and bias that lead to frustration and dissatisfaction with the entire educational system. Carmen Lopez, executive director of College Horizons, a nonprofit dedicated to improving college success for Native American students, calls such challenges the “ghosts of colonialism” and urges universities to increase their cultural sensitivity and outreach. *Source: *Colleges work to increase Native American students’ access and completion*. (2020, February). Georgetown University: The Feed. @<https://feed.georgetown.edu/access-affordability/colleges-work-to-increase-native-american-students-access-and-completion>

Since 2017, United Natives has worked to turn these grim statistics around via its college mentoring program which helps prepare young people for an empowered adulthood guided by culture, family and traditions. According to Dr. Crystal Lee, who initiated the project while working on her doctoral dissertation at the University Nevada at Las Vegas, mentoring is natural in Native American communities as elders are traditionally looked to for guidance and counseling.

The current mentoring program is designed to involve students online, in person, or a combination of the two approaches. In addition to academic support, opportunities to take part in meaningful civic engagement, social action, leadership, and cultural awareness activities are also available. Currently, there are 15 undergraduate mentees, 1 graduate mentee and 7 who serve on the youth council. This includes the Civic Engagement mentorship program in Nevada that had 8 mentees engage in voter registration, voting access and legislative policy building

Tribal Youth Council: Preparing the Next Generation of Leaders.

The newly formed Tribal Youth Council is actively working with United Natives to help promote the organization’s values and service philosophies. Via social media and other traditional platforms, it is tasked with soliciting input from young people, across tribal affiliations, about the direction of the organization as well as helping to implement youth-based activities and events. They are also part of the United Nations Global Indigenous Youth Caucus to gain experience on international advocacy and policy development. The council allows young Native voices to be heard on issues that concern them most and provides young stakeholders with an outlet for addressing these challenges.

- **Voter Registration: Ensuring that Native Voices Count**

According to the U.S. Census, American Indians and Alaska Natives have one of the youngest populations of any racial/ethnic group in the United States, with those under the age of 25 making up about 40 percent of the total American Indian and Alaska Native population. Every four years, about half a million Native young people turn 18 and become eligible to vote. This provides a chance to engage almost one in ten Native people as new voters. *Source: Native Vote (www.nativevote.org/category/newsroom/).*

In 2020, United Native mentees took part in a highly successful “Get Out the Native Vote” campaign in Southern Nevada. In partnership with the Las Vegas Indian Center & Native Voters Alliance, volunteers participated in a number of outreach events aimed at encouraging Native people, especially those ages 18 to 25, to exercise their right to vote. With support from the NDN Collective, National Congress of American Indians, and Silver State Voices, this important effort resulted in more Native people “casting their ballots” in 2020 than ever before. United Natives is diligently working to raise the visibility of the nation’s first people as a valuable political “voting bloc”... particularly in swing, rural, and other states with significant tribal representation.

- **Philanthropic Support**

Philanthropic contributions for mentor training, campus outreach activities, and Tribal Youth Council workshops are being sought. “Seed funding” to establish a tutoring/mentorship program for K-12 students is also needed.

HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

- **Pandemic Relief Efforts: Helping Those In Need**

In a joint venture with Dr. Michelle Tom, a Family Medicine practitioner based on the Navajo reservation (and nearby clinic in Winslow, Arizona), United Natives was able to distribute over \$1.5 million in critically needed supplies to hard-hit residents in 2020. Last year, United Natives also became a co-founder of a Native-led, intertribal quarantine /behavioral health site for virus-positive Indigenous people living in northeastern and south-central Arizona. United Natives is committed to continuing its emergency relief efforts to support the Navajo Nation and other rural/urban tribal communities going forward into 2021.

- **Behavioral Health: Healing the Mind, Body and Spirit**

Buy two weeks-worth of groceries, work from home and wash hands frequently were among the many initial recommendations for preventing the spread of COVID-19. For vulnerable Native populations, especially those living on reservations, these seemingly simple “at-home” guidelines are often difficult, if not impossible, to follow. Housing on reservations is overcrowded, and nearly half of it can be considered substandard. It is estimated that between 35–40 percent of homes on the Navajo Nation do not have running water, and, according to the report “Closing the Water Access Gap in the United States”, 58 out of every 1,000 Native American households lack plumbing. Additionally, Indigenous populations have a poverty rate of 25.4 percent, and on some reservations the rate is almost 40 percent. Many do not have immediate access to a sufficient quantity of affordable, nutritious food and live day to day with hunger or food insecurity as their constant companion. Source: Schultz, H.A. (2020, March 31). *Native American Communities and COVID-19: How Foundations Can Help*. *Health Affairs Journal*. <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/hblog20200331.659944/full/>

Given these sobering statistics and realizing that an already traumatized people were being further traumatized by COVID-19, the Native community turned inward to find solutions to help fight the spread of this deadly disease. More specifically, a small coalition of partners (including United Natives) quickly mobilized and set up a culturally-responsive, transitional quarantine center in Phoenix. The facility was designed to not only provide individuals and families with a safe place to isolate but also address behavioral health issues complicated by the pandemic. Using traditional Native American healing practices along with integrative care and evidence-based treatment techniques, the center offers residents a holistic and welcoming environment aimed at soothing the mind, body and spirit.

A second location in Mesa, Arizona has also been established under the direction of United Natives director, Dr. Crystal Lee, therefore, have two residential program sites in both Phoenix and Mesa, Arizona.

Residential services for individuals and families include:

- **housing:** individual units to appropriately accommodate single residents and families
- **counseling:** anger management, substance/alcohol abuse, domestic violence, and parenting
- **integrative health:** yoga, meditation, music, and art therapy
- **Native traditional healing:** smudging and purification, talking circles, songs and drumming, Red Road and Circle of Strength teachings, Native arts and crafts, storytelling
- **transportation:** transportation to/from to enter and/or exist the program and transportation for any medical appointments
- **meals:** a plant-based diet meal 3 times/day is given to each client

Native Americans utilize our residential mental/behavioral health program to address such issues; grief, trauma, substance abuse, escaping domestic violence, housing insecurity, and/or obtain a GED. Our classes are meditation therapy, anger management, traumatic yoga therapy, meditation breathing, DUI, art therapy, GED training, parenting, substance abuse, music therapy, domestic violence and mens/womens group.

Referrals are made via existing residents in our program to their friends/family. In addition, we have working partnerships with tribes, tribally-led organizations and other community-based organizations as a referral source. We offer this program for entire families to ensure family unity as we do not believe in separation of families. Therefore, we have educational and day-care services for the toddlers, adolescents and teenagers. We offer vocational rehabilitation jobs to persons who have demonstrated success in their rehabilitation efforts. We not only provide We are the only model in the United States that services Native Americans in this capacity.

A third outpatient clinic in Nevada opened in June, 2021 and is housed at the Las Vegas Indian Center. The Las Vegas site has case management, individual/family therapy, psychosocial rehabilitation, physical therapy, balance/fall risk screening, basic skills training, biofeedback, group therapy and injury prevention/recovery.

- **Philanthropic Support**

Funding to expand behavioral health services are needed and, in particular, financial funding to continue to service the most marginalized and underserved communities in the United States.

OUTCOMES: MEASURING SUCCESS

To date, we have serviced more than 1,700 Native American people who have entered our program for both quarantine and/or mental/behavioral health services. Out of the 700+ plus people we quarantined, 1 resulted in COVID-19 related-death, leaving our COVID-19 rehabilitation success rate high in comparison to other neighboring epidemiological statistics among Native Americans. Our program is voluntary, therefore, people can discharge themselves, therefore about 80% of the people who discharge themselves return to our program.

HIGHLIGHTS: PROVIDING STRONG LEADERSHIP & DIRECTION

Director

- United Natives is the only organization of its kind whose Director, Dr. Crystal Lee, is a “working scientist”. She is currently conducting infectious disease/ biomedical prevention research focusing specifically on Native American health and recently acquired a Masters of Legal Studies in Indigenous Peoples Law from the University of Oklahoma.
- The Director of United Natives, Dr. Crystal Lee, is an internationally recognized leader in Indigenous health/wellness policies and serves on the following: United Nations North American Caucus, Global Indigenous Women's Caucus and Gender Equality Task Force, and the L’Oréal USA Diversity and Inclusion Board of Directors. She was also a Tribal Health Advisor to the Obama Administration and was honored by President Bill Clinton for her work at the Clinton Global Initiative.
- United Natives got recognized as “USA Today” as a leading non-profit organization in Indian Country.

Services and Programs

- In 2020, United Natives was able to distribute over \$1.5 million in critically needed supplies to hard-hit residents of the Navajo Nation.
- A blending of traditional Native American healing practices along with integrative care and evidence-based treatment techniques provides a unique healing experience for those seeking behavioral health care services.
- United Natives health component hired Native American medical and mental/behavioral health professions (i.e., M.D., PhD, RN, LCSW, etc.) to provide direct services.

FUTURE GOALS: LOOKING FORWARD

Looking forward, United Natives will continue to initiate new projects and programs that foster the self-determination of Indigenous people through economic sovereignty, cultural flourishing, political resilience, and community well-being.

A donation is a creative act - an opportunity for an individual or group to transform an organization or catalyze its next stage of growth. To help shape the future of United Natives and support the people it serves, please contact drcrystal@unitednatives.org or visit our website’s giving page at unitednatives.org