

T.R.A.I.L. BLAZERS



BOYS & GIRLS CLUBS IN INDIAN COUNTRY'S T.R.A.I.L. PARTICIPANTS PAVE THE WAY TO HEALTHY LIVES

Photos: Mike McKee

Kelly Bell & Tony Choate

More than one in three Native American children born in 2000 will likely be diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes in their lifetime, according to the Indian Health Service. What used to be called adult onset diabetes is now called Type 2 diabetes because children are affected as much as adults. In Indian Country, Type 2 diabetes has been reported in children as young as four years of age.

But the good news is that thousands of Native American children are on the T.R.A.I.L. (Together Raising Awareness for Indian Life) to Diabetes Prevention. Exclusive to Boys & Girls Clubs in Indian Country, this twelve-week program aims to curtail the effects of unhealthy eating habits and lack of physical activity that can lead to obesity, diabetes, and other chronic diseases. Even better, the program teaches children to apply the holistic approach to life inherent to their Native tradition.

Making the Connection

In Sulphur, Oklahoma, twelve-year-old Mercedes Wiggins has witnessed how diabetes

has affected her grandparents. "They have to watch what they eat and watch their blood sugar," she said. Before participating in the T.R.A.I.L. program at the Chickasaw Nation Boys & Girls Club, she didn't know much about the disease. "I just knew it could kill you," she said. But after completing the T.R.A.I.L. curriculum, Wiggins said, "Now, I know why people have diabetes and I am more aware of what I eat."

After making the connection between obesity and health risks such as diabetes, Wiggins learned to read food labels through a T.R.A.I.L. activity. "It made me think to eat healthier so that I don't get sick when I am older. I now know what diabetes is and all of the facts, and ways to prevent it." Now she is able to influence her family. At home, she encourages her mom to make food from scratch. "When it is homemade it cuts down on the fat grams," she said.

Growing Strong

The Chickasaw Nation was so impressed with T.R.A.I.L. that it integrated the program into

its "Camp Survivor." Located in the scenic Arbuckle Mountains of Oklahoma, the camp promotes a healthy lifestyle to hundreds of Indian campers at an early age. Toni Pace, chief professional officer of the Chickasaw Nation Boys & Girls Club, capitalized on the shared missions and used the camp as incentive to recruit more kids into the T.R.A.I.L. program.

For ten-year-old Colton Dresser, T.R.A.I.L. prepared him to walk the ten-mile daily hike that's required at Camp Survivor. Because of what he learned through the physical activity component of the program, now "I walk a lot more," he said. Dresser, a member of the Chickasaw Nation Boys & Girls Club, said one of the most important things he learned through T.R.A.I.L. was the difference between a healthy snack and junk food. "They teach you how to eat healthy, and if you don't watch what you are eating, it's not good for you," he said.

Lifting Spirits

Involvement of family and community members has been integral to the success of the program



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at the Chickasaw Nation. Chickasaw Nation's T.R.A.I.L. coordinator Colt Digby said the children who are going through the program are very motivated and love to discuss what they learn as a group. "When I walk through the door, the kids always have a smile on their faces, asking if T.R.A.I.L. is going to be today," said Digby.

Calkins added that the Nez Perce community sees the big things the club is doing in their small community and that T.R.A.I.L. has fostered a fresh perspective on the club. She said the community embraces the T.R.A.I.L. program more and more each year. She added, "If not for the Club and T.R.A.I.L. program, most of these kids would never have the opportunity to travel to Seattle, enjoy a Seahawks game, or meet new kids at an affiliate club." T.R.A.I.L. has "opened the kids' world" in ways they never expected.

Fostering Generational Change

Calkins uses the kids themselves to measure the program's success. As the club director,

she sees them grow every day, season after season. "This is a really small community, so I can easily spot the difference in them. The kids are clearly more confident with physical activities, so they stay more active."

Children of the Chickasaw, Nez Perce and nearly 35 other tribal nations are learning valuable life lessons. As they pass this knowledge along, they will play a critical role in helping T.R.A.I.L. accomplish its mission to foster generational changes that honor the mind-body-spirit approach to life.

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