

NATIVE RIGHTS

Joshua Arce works with reservations to change lives.

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Joshua Arce



It's not a secret that Native Americans in the United States suffer. They have dealt with injustices, human rights inequalities, and a bloody history dating back hundreds of years.

Many populations living on remote reservations are isolated and impoverished. Joshua Arce, the president and CEO of Partnership With Native Americans (PWNA), is working to create brighter futures for them.

"When it comes to my work, I've always focused on raising awareness of Native issues, Native communities, and educating people on what is taking place in Indian Country," he says.

PWNA is one of the largest non-profit organizations in the U.S. committed to supporting Native Americans and helping them overcome the challenges they deal with on a daily basis,

ensuring that Native communities and their deep-rooted struggles don't go unnoticed. It provides consistent aid and services for Native Americans with the highest need in the country.

Working with reservation partners for the last three decades, the organization improves the lives of 250,000 tribal citizens annually through its six program categories: education, health, food and water, emergency services, holiday services, and animal welfare.

"PWNA's mission is serving immediate needs and supporting long-term solutions," Arce says. "We have a dual approach, and the work that we do, day in and day out, is something near and dear to me. Serving these Native communities has always been my passion."

One in four Native American families faces food insecurity. Many reservations have contaminated water, increasing the population's risk of illness and diseases. It is even a struggle for youth to enroll in college due to a lack of scholarship funding.



Maria Fernandez, Arce, and Pam Giannonatti

Unfortunately, most Americans do not realize the challenges Native Americans face. Arce wants people to be what he calls more NativeAware, to have the uncomfortable discussions about the inequality of tribal communities. It's important to discuss the symptoms—the reasons why PWNA needs to stay visible—but discussion can lead to solutions. And who better to have the solutions than those experiencing the symptoms?

“At the end of the day, it's important to let people know that Native communities are the ones who know the best solutions for their communities, and they're also going to be able to help provide the most sustainable solutions,” Arce explains. “They just need resources.”

He cites PWNA's mission to help more Native youth and adults pursue a higher education, which will help lower some of the present economic barriers and hopefully decrease some of the social bias and fight those myths about Indian people.

“Especially the myth about college being free—it isn't always true for Native Americans,” adds Arce.

One of PWNA's key focuses right now is educating the public about the country's Native history. Arce points out that, while Americans know some basics about how tribes had their land stolen with the arrival of Europeans, many people don't understand

or acknowledge what that means. They are unaware of that history's lasting impact, including how extremely limited Native people's access is to things most people take for granted, like food and water.

“There is a lack of Native visibility in history books and in classrooms. I have these discussions with a lot of people I meet with, and it's eye-opening for them,” remarks Arce. “The most common question is usually, ‘Why did I never learn this?’ Their eyes get wide in shock.”

Recently, PWNA gained recognition and a platform through a partnership with *Viewpoint*, an award-winning series hosted by actor Dennis Quaid and dedicated to educational documentaries about topics such as culture, business, and technology. Through *Viewpoint*, PWNA released a video called “Native Nations Today” that reveals the ups and downs Native communities face—the ups being how youth and adults are now attending higher-education institutions as well



LEFT: Arce (left) at the AIEF NABI Youth Summit

BOTTOM: Delivering emergency boxes to Wanblee



as trade programs to learn new skills for a brighter future; the downs include a lack of food sources and clean water. (Some communities have to physically haul water onto their reservations from other locations.) These obstacles stem from systematic policies that were intended to isolate Native peoples and disrupt their ancestral ways of life. PWNA hopes that “Native Nations Today” will make people more aware of Indigenous struggles.

“People need to know that less than 1 percent of charitable giving supports Native causes—there’s not enough awareness there,” Arce says. “If more people were NativeAware, I believe they would be willing to give or donate to a Native-led organization like PWNA.”

As a member of the Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation, Arce grew up in the heart of tribal communities, so he brings a sense of humility and deep understanding to PWNA.

Before joining the organization in 2020, Arce spent more than 20 years working in education management, social work, and business development. A Kansas Native, he earned a bachelor’s degree in social work at the University of Kansas, later receiving his juris doctor of law and tribal lawyer certification at the University of Kansas School of Law. Most recently, he served as the first chief information officer of Haskell Indian Nations University, where he advanced IT infrastructure and services to enhance student experience. Arce also served on PWNA’s board before becoming the CEO.

“I’ve worked with Indian Country my entire career, so coming to PWNA was a natural fit,” he says. “I was able to seamlessly transition to the role because I was completely familiar with issues facing the communities we are serving, and I truly know people in these communities. That made it really meaningful to me to come into the role.”

Arce hopes that future Native generations steer their focus toward the land they live on and how their neighbors might lack funding that could change their lives.

“There’s a lot of pride in these communities, and they’re the right type of communities to support. There’s a ton of opportunity and a high ceiling for success here, and that’s what the world of philanthropy should know,” he says. “Tribal communities are a good investment, and they will be blown away with some of the results, especially if they get an opportunity to travel to their lands and visit with their members. We need the next generation of philanthropists to be bold, move that needle, and do something for transformational change.” **LM**