

## Partnership With Native Americans Shines a Light on Our True Forefathers

If you were asked to describe your knowledge of Native Americans, what would come to mind? Feathered headdresses? Stories about the first Thanksgiving? Perhaps the mascots of certain professional football and baseball teams?

Native American myths would surprise most people, but the reality is even more shocking—Native Americans have long been one of the nation's most underserved and marginalized populations. Consider these statistics:

- 23% of Native Americans live with food insecurity—the highest in the U.S.
- Obesity impacts 31% of Native American children due to inadequate nutrition
- Only 13% of Native Americans have a college degree

The list goes on. However, since 1990, **Partnership With Native Americans (PWNA)**, a Native-led and Native-serving 501(c)(3) organization, has strived to develop and deliver services to help its Native American partners address critical needs that contribute to self-sufficiency and help end the cycle of poverty.

Ashleigh Hughes, PWNA's fundraising and development vice president, explains that the organization originally started in Virginia, and its donor office remains there today—in Culpeper. It began programming early on, transitioning from serving urban Natives to community-based programs on reservations. Because they focus on the most remote and underserved areas where the highest concentration of need exists, PWNA currently prioritizes more than 300 tribal communities in 9 states, where they reach about 250,000 Native Americans annually.

PWNA partners with hundreds of tribal agencies in the states it serves, and they focus on six pillars to improve quality of life: health, food and water, education, emergency services, holiday support, and animal welfare.

Many health concerns revolve around the ongoing need for nutritious foods and safe drinking water. Ashleigh notes that because some reservations are so remote, many individuals live in "food deserts." For example, 173,000 Navajo residents have access to just 13 grocery stores spread over thousands of miles. As a result, most of their food is purchased from convenience stores, consisting primarily of packaged foods vs. fresh fruits, vegetables, and other nutritional food sources. Similarly, because reservation homes often lack indoor plumbing, individuals must travel great distances to procure or haul safe water for drinking and cooking.

To alleviate this problem in the short-term, PWNA and its partners regularly provide boxes of food staples and bottled water to Native American food pantries and senior centers for distribution to tribal citizens. But to mitigate

the issue on a long-term basis, the organization focuses on programs like "Project Grow," which supports community gardens. Using a mobile training unit, they teach reservation communities how to grow their own produce and demonstrate how to prepare traditional Native American dishes using their botanical bounty. This provides critical skills while honoring their heritage and drawing on healthy, ancestral diets.

A focus on education also offers both immediate and long-term solutions. Because PWNA believes that education is one of the most important cornerstones of self-sufficiency and a brighter future, it has programs geared toward children from pre-kindergarten through high school as well as support for college students and career professionals.

To help increase K–12 enrollment and retention, up to 25,000 students in PWNA's service area receive essential school supplies, such as a backpack filled with notebooks, folders, index cards, paper, pens, pencils, and more. Since 2012, they've maintained a partnership with TOMS® to distribute shoes to thousands of Native youth annually.

PWNA further supports K–12 school partners through literacy supplies and incentives to motivate reading and encourage adult-child reading time, as well as incentive products used by Head Start partners focused on early childhood education.

In addition, the organization supports college students by providing laptops or grants for degree pre-requisite tools, as well as scholarships to both undergraduate and graduate students—see the sidebar for a student success story.

As it did for other marginalized communities, the onset of COVID-19 greatly magnified the pre-existing issues facing Native Americans living in remote areas. Although their communities are geographically isolated, all it takes is one infected person to visit a family member on a reservation for the virus to spread. Overcrowded and intergenerational living conditions, a lack of indoor plumbing, scant access to food and water, and lack of internet for distance learning have all been compounded during the pandemic. However, because it's considered an essential service, PWNA has faithfully continued its many year-round services as well as COVID-19 emergency relief deliveries since last March. It is grateful for increased donations, which help them to keep moving forward with their mission.

To learn more, visit [nativepartnership.org](http://nativepartnership.org), join their #NativeAware campaign, and follow the organization on Facebook and Instagram @PWNA4hope. To donate, contact Barbara Bailey at (540) 825-5950 x200. 📞



(Courtesy of Brian Wallace)

### PWNA AEIF scholar Alyssa London proudly wears a traditional outfit from her Alaska Native heritage.

Through its American Indian Education Fund (AEIF) program, PWNA awards scholarships for Native American students across the country. Of those who receive scholarships, 90–95% complete their freshman year—the toughest—despite the many obstacles they face. In addition to financial support, the scholarship program involves a mentoring element, which plays a critical role in student success.

Meet Alyssa London, a Tlingit Alaska Native who now has many credits to her name—cultural ambassador, author, Miss Alaska USA 2017, and more. She graduated from Stanford University with a degree in Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity in 2012, thanks in part to an AEIF scholarship.

Alyssa has great respect for her mentor, Doug Franco, noting, "I learned a great deal from him. I think the mentorship component is one of the aspects that makes AIEF different from other scholarships, and that is highly valuable because lessons the mentor shares stick with you."



(Courtesy of PWNA)

A tribal Elder participates in PWNA's mobile nutrition training with the Pascua Yaqui community in Tucson, Arizona.



(Courtesy of PWNA)

Native participants like this Navajo woman and her grandson benefit from PWNA food, health, and seasonal services.

~ Nancy Griffin-Bonnaire

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