

Summit equips Native youths, communities for healthy living

Tanya Manus Journal staff Aug 5, 2019



Dani Butcher calls to the rest of the group while he and Keion Clifford stop to eat wild raspberries they found while foraging for plants in the Black Hills during the second annual Native Youth Food Sovereignty Summit at Storm Mountain.

Adam Fondren, Journal staff

Native American teens got a summer camp-style crash course in weaving traditional Lakota culture and timeless skills into a healthy 21st century lifestyle.

The second annual Native Youth Food Sovereignty Summit immerses kids in lessons about nutrition, cooking, Lakota culture, health and life skills. About 40 kids, ages 13 to 17, from the Cheyenne River and Pine Ridge reservations were chosen by their community leaders to attend the invitation-only summit. The teens spent July 29-31 at Storm Mountain near Rapid City learning how to cultivate positive physical and mental health.

“We’re covering a lot of ground,” said Laura Schad, the program information coordinator for Partnership with Native Americans (PWNA), which is presenting the summit with the Eagle Butte-based Cheyenne River Youth Project (CRYP).

The CRYP is a grassroots nonprofit organization that provides Cheyenne River Reservation youths with programs and projects to encourage self-sufficiency, strong families and communities. PWNA partners with 60 reservations in 12 states to meet immediate and long-term needs in Native communities.

Teens sometimes take on adult responsibilities in their families, including food preparation. The Native Youth Food Sovereignty Summit was initially created because of requests from Native community members, said Rafael Tapia Jr., vice president of programs for PWNA. Teens are gaining skills and information at the summit they can share with their families and friends.

“We partner with folks in the community ... to expand people’s skills sets and their capacity to do for themselves,” Tapia said.

During the summit, Dani Butcher and Austin Red Dog of the New Hope Shelter & Garden in Eagle Butte took teens on forest field trips, demonstrating how to forage plants that have medicinal qualities. Teens learned how they could use plants to create lip balms and healing salves, and how plants can be used for traditional ceremonies and food. The teens also learned to use herbs in homemade salad dressings; they’ll go home with seeds to plant their own herbs, Schad said.

The youths also explored their Lakota culture by learning about life celebrations. A session about tinspila (prairie turnips) and sacred animals focused on eating well for spiritual and physical strength, said Phyllis Swift Hawk, a 55-year resident of Wanblee. Swift Hawk is a community action team activity coordinator who is helping implement emergency preparedness, a community garden and other resources that improve lives of Wanblee residents.

“We’ll be sharing stories about the sacredness of plants and animals. We have stories told by our grandparents we’ll share with the youth, and why it’s important to stay healthy. We’re very excited,” Swift Hawk said.

Teens at the summit live in small towns where access to nutritious food and resources is limited, so a “Chopped Indigenized” competition put youths’ creativity to the test. Taking inspiration from the Food Network series, each teen received a surprise basket with a limited number of kitchen tools he or she had to use to create an appetizer and dessert, Schad said.

Because the summit’s overall goal is to help the teens live healthier, stronger lives, some sessions addressed mental and spiritual issues, and resources where kids can find help when they or others are struggling with depression, Schad said.

Some of the summit focused on decision-making, self-care and self-awareness, Tapia said.

“Some of the challenges our youth face are pretty extreme in some cases, where they’re dealing with socio-economic challenges and the surroundings they’re exposed to, some adversity they’re facing,” Tapia said.

Health educator Emily Good Weasel, who is on the staff of the Great Plains Tribal Chairmen’s Health Board, talked about heart rates, portion control and other tips for maintaining good physical health, Schad said.

Some classic summer-camp fun — outdoors games, a campfire, a movie and more — rounded out the summit. Organizers hope the event will grow and will eventually accommodate up to 100 kids at a time.

“Last year I met with the group of kids that went (to the summit),” said Swift Hawk, who accompanied five teens to this year’s event. “A lot of them stated that they are not going to eat junk food. They want healthier food. They have a better understanding of the importance of buffalo meat.