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Native kids have path to success

Futures for Children has been cultivating the dreams of Native children here in the Southwest for more than four decades. Since 1968 the main goal for the group has been to encourage Native students to graduate high school and enter college. Now the organization is ready to expand its circle and facilitate youth leadership development throughout Indian Country.

First, here are some sobering statistics. The dropout rate for American Indians is more than 50 percent, and in some places in New Mexico that number hovers around 80 percent. According to the National Center for Education and Statistics, American Indians have the lowest percentage of students attending college of any ethnic group in the country.

But what is most bleak is what those dropout numbers lead to — American Indians suffer from a poverty rate that is twice that of the national average and our homeless rates are some of the highest in the country.

Here's the good news. More than 95 percent of Futures for Children students involved in the Friendship/Mentoring program graduate high school.

More than half of Futures' students pursue college or other post-secondary education, twice the national average of Native students overall. What's their secret?

"We couldn't do it without the volunteers and mentors," said Jim West, CEO of Futures for Children. "We have mentors from 16 countries, like Switzerland, Germany, Japan, etc. They invest their time, they invest their finances, and what they're really investing in is the future of an Indian child.

"We also have 142 volunteers here in New Mexico and Arizona who provide us with infrastructure on the reservations, and 90 percent of those volunteers are tribal members. So, the mentors, the volunteers, they all give gifts to the students everyday with their time and energy," said West, a member of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes of Oklahoma.



Harlan McKosato
Commentary

West said Futures is implementing a new project called Second Circle of Support. It is part of the organization's three-tiered support system. This second circle supports the first circle, which matched up students with mentors for encouragement and support, and is intended to inspire students to develop their self-esteem, sharpen their communication and public speaking skills, and become role models in their community. In the Third Circle of Support, training is offered to parents and families of the students.

"We have to raise expectations of Native children," said West. "We have to open their eyes and open up their world. Education can be that key that unlocks their potential and a healthy support system can keep them focused and inspire them to achieve great things."

There are numerous components to the youth leadership program, including a vast curriculum, experiential learning modules, training for the project coaches and each specific program within the tribal community culminates with a community service project.

Another component of Futures for Children's outreach, awareness and fundraising efforts is a music concert featuring some of the top names in Albuquerque's Native music scene. The concert is called "Futures for Children Native Jam Night" and is scheduled for Nov. 10 at the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center in Albuquerque.

Recent Native American Music Award winner Shelley Morningsong will start things off at 6 p.m. She will be followed by Plateros (featuring young Navajo guitar sensation Levi Platero), Saving Damsels (featuring JJ Otero on vocals and lead guitar) and reggae rock band Native Roots (for more information, go to www.futuresforchildren.org). The concert is designed to raise awareness of what Futures for Children is and what it has to offer.

Futures hopes to implement a delivery system of its Second Circle of Support that will soon reach more than 1,000 students and expects to expand into Oklahoma in the near future. The measuring stick will be to look back in five years to see whether Native students are more successful in education.

Harlan McKosato, a Sauk/Toaway, is host of the syndicated radio show Native America Calling, which airs weekdays at 11 a.m. on KUNM, 89.9 FM.