

*Preserving American Indian*

# PRESERVING AMERICAN INDIAN CULTURE AND VALUES



*American Indian Family Empowerment Program  
Strengthening community by investing in its people*

AMERICAN INDIAN FAMILY EMPOWERMENT PROGRAM  
STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY BY INVESTING IN ITS PEOPLE

*Preserving American Indian*

Gabrielle Strong - Dakota  
AIFEP administrator and Grotto  
Foundation program officer

# GIVING IS AT HEART OF AMERICAN INDIAN TRADITIONS



“While ‘philanthropy’ is a new term to Native communities, the philanthropic concept has long been at the heart of tribal societies. Giving with honor or to honor others remains a cherished traditional practice today. The work of Ronald Austin Wells, who wrote *Native American Philanthropy*, emphasizes the Native giving tradition as part of an innovative educational initiative seeking to maintain and enhance a civil society. Indeed, American Indians were referred to as ‘America’s first philanthropists.’ Giving by individuals to the community

contributes to social harmony, reinforces the interconnectedness of the members of the community to one another and to their environment, and restores balance.

Native philosophy reflects core community values that have sustained tribal communities for generations. Values such as generosity, compassion, courage and fortitude translate to practices that must not only be preserved, but transmitted to each new generation. The challenges faced by tribal communities today can only be resolved by drawing on the strengths, beauty and resiliency within the tribal community and culture. AIFEP recognizes that each individual and family has a gift to offer their community – be it a talent, a skill, a strategy, energy or simply one’s own presence.

## AIFEP IS ROOTED IN THE TRADITION OF GIVING

The American Indian Family Empowerment Program (AIFEP) is a unique grant-making program that began operating in 1996 under the direction of the Marbrook Foundation and an American Indian community advisory committee.

The program is unique on at least four fronts. First, its application process seeks simplicity; second, it focuses on individuals and families, recognizing their ability to contribute to cultural and community revitalization; third, its awards are relatively small at roughly \$2,500 per award; and finally, grant-making decisions are made by an advisory board composed of American Indian leaders from the

community at large. Approximately \$100,000 is granted annually.

Since its inception in 1996, AIFEP has received almost 600 individual grant requests totaling approximately \$1.5 million. About 300 individual grant awards have been made, totaling almost half a million dollars.

## NURTURING FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

The objectives of the program are holistic and reflect long-standing American Indian values.

- AIFEP recognizes American Indian families for their community and cultural contributions.
- AIFEP's grantmaking is an investment in human capital and self-determination, specifically the skills and resources that people possess that allow them to lead healthy and productive lives, build strong relationships, and make meaningful contributions to their community.
- AIFEP is a culturally responsive grant-making initiative that blends the values of American Indian tradition, with innovative philanthropic concepts.

## AIFEP'S VISION TO LAUNCH A STAND-ALONE ORGANIZATION

Ultimately, our vision is that American Indian culture and values be respected, preserved, and shared. Given the long-standing difficulties that the American Indian community continues to face, this goal and the work of AIFEP is more critical to the health of our community than ever. And the benefits of the program have the potential to extend well beyond the American Indian community.

To achieve our vision, AIFEP works proactively to support and encourage American Indian families and individuals in the Twin Cities area to be of service to their community, connected to their culture, and to achieve their full potential. Our long-term goal is to launch a self-sustaining initiative, so we can serve more American Indian people and share more widely a process that is steeped in our own philanthropic traditions. Similarly, we seek to advance American Indian leadership and participation within mainstream philanthropy, while engaging our own tribal communities.”

# A NON-PRESCRIPTIVE PROGRAM THAT NOURISHES CULTURAL STRENGTHS OF AMERICAN INDIANS

Markell Brooks –  
Marbrook Foundation  
board member

“About 12 years ago, when the initiative was conceived, I understood that American Indian cultures and spirituality possess inherent and extraordinary knowledge about the Earth and how to live life in general. I realized that by creating a community-based program, The Marbrook Foundation had the opportunity to encourage American Indian people to focus on the spiritual part of their culture and heritage to bring about healing.

A primary objective of the AIFEP program is to encourage American Indian individuals to become more connected, so they, in turn can encourage others, creating an entire network of strong Indian leaders who are grounded in their spiritual and cultural heritage.

Those who have not studied racial issues often don't understand current and historic barriers that suppress cultural connectivity – particularly in racial groups that have been oppressed.

At the same time, there is value in framing American Indian social issues and solutions as opportunities rather than problems that seem impossible to overcome. AIFEP recognizes that wonderful cultural strengths exist right under our noses. We spend extraordinary energy talking and researching about the problems that American Indians face and go so far as to criticize them for things that European Americans introduced them to.

I have a friend who is an environmental artist; she did a seven-year study throughout 12 countries. It focused on the medicine wheel. The wheel symbolizes the the four directions, four stages of life, four elements of human nature, and provides spiritual understanding. The friend went into an indigenous community in each of the countries and asked three questions:

1. What is your heritage?
2. What is your community's main problem as you see it?
3. What do you see as a solution for the problem?

The primary lesson was that indigenous communities throughout the world possess the inherent capacity to define their own problems and devise their own solutions in the context of their unique cultural and spiritual ways of knowing.

These are questions that I think are relevant to AIFEP. We go to the community and allow them to define the problem and solution. We who are on the other side, the non-oppressed – our problem is ignorance. We need to be aware and then ask what we can do.

The grantees share their stories. Their stories inspire others – they have more effect than numbers and telling others what to do. The intention is the important thing; the board, the grantees and original funding partners have the right intent. The intent is not to control, and not to tell the grantees what to do, but instead, to be like fertilizer and nourish their efforts. The intent is to support these individuals with a sense of humility on indigenous terms. Through AIFEP, we get our power by supporting others.”



*“A primary objective of the AIFEP program is to create an entire network of strong Indian leaders who are grounded in their spiritual and cultural heritage.”*

*American Indian Family Empowerment Program is a grantmaking partnership of the:*

- *Marbrook Foundation*
- *Westcliff Foundation*
- *Grotto Foundation*

Servando Almaguer – Menominee  
Apprentice carpenter and  
traditional dancer

## AIFEP HELPED ME RECONNECT WITH AMERICAN INDIAN TRADITIONS



*“My elders tell me,  
‘Start the drum,  
do the ceremony,  
spread the word  
and people will  
show up.’  
I’ve known where  
ceremonies were in  
the past,  
I just couldn’t  
get there.”*



“I broke a leg and it took me out of work for four months. I have a strong work ethic, but no insurance. I had nothing – and I vowed that that would never happen to me again. The AIFEP application asks what other resources have you used? I had used them all. There isn’t much help for single men who don’t have children.

A difference in this awards program is that you have to have your ducks in a row prior to filling out an application. AIFEP grantees have already done many things; they’re not just waiting for a handout. If you are willing to nurture that, are you truly trying to help people? You could drop random checks in the mail and see what you get. But with this program

you have to have already accomplished so much.

When I chose carpentry as a career, I didn’t realize that it’s not so much what you do on the job site, it’s the lifestyle you lead so that you can get to the job site. I go to bed very early, and am wide awake at 4:30 a.m. It’s my new schedule – just me and the birds.

I used part of the grant to get a car and part of the grant to reconnect with my American Indian heritage. My elders tell me, ‘Start the drum, do the ceremony, spread the word and people will show up.’ I’ve known where ceremonies were in the past, I just couldn’t get there. I’ve done a lot of traveling since receiving the grant, connecting to other Natives. I’ve been to Oregon,

Fond du Lac, Canada, all over. I am able to connect with others in ways I couldn’t without a car. I’ve been to see my grandparents. Having a vehicle has leap-frogged what I would have been able to do on my own.”

# I WANT TO SHARE KNOWLEDGE OF DISEASES WITH FUTURE GENERATIONS

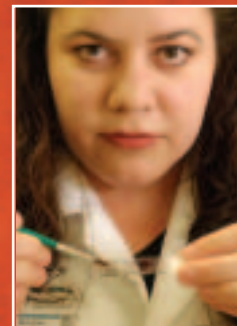
*Dr. Tiffany Beckman - Ojibwe  
First American Indian  
endocrinologist ·*

*"E*ach generation passes along knowledge and wisdom to the next. The American Indian community prides itself on cultural heritage and preservation. However, sometimes in the medical field we see unhealthy habits passed along. Most recently we've seen diabetes emerge as a major concern in the American Indian community. During my fellowship training, diabetes has been my focus.

The grant I received from AIFEP allowed me to buy a portable LCD projector that allows me to provide training when I travel within the American Indian community.

I recently gave a presentation at a meeting called "Traditional Knowledge, Powerful Medicine" at the Indian Health Board Clinic, where I discussed nutrition and the role of traditional diet in maintaining good health.

Diabetes education is important not only to the current American Indian community, but has value to future generations. I am hoping that today's elders will pass this information on to future generations. Diabetes really is a man-made disease, and I think we can do more to prevent it through education and training within the American Indian community."



*"Diabetes education is important not only to the current American Indian community, but has value to future generations."*



David Burbank – Ojibwe  
Minneapolis police officer

## I WANT TO CONNECT WITH YOUTH WHEN THEY'RE NOT IN TROUBLE



*“These interactions allow me to connect with youth in a positive way... Building positive relationships benefits the whole community.”*

*“*The decision to use the money for a computer was made by my whole family; we wanted something everyone could benefit from. It’s fun to watch the kids build their computer skills and play games on the new computer. For me, this computer has been very useful for communications in both work and at home. It allows me to network with fellow police officers and do work from home.

I am also able to use it to create Power Point presentations. The presentations support family education and encourage American Indians to get their kids involved in extra-curricular activities and Native culture. These interactions allow me to connect with youth in a positive way

– when they are not in trouble. Building positive relationships benefits the whole community. This grant has almost forced me to commit myself to using the computer toward something that promotes Native culture.

The application process is user friendly, and the program leaders are very open-minded about how you use the money. I hope it will be around for a long time to help a lot more people. My family is very appreciative of it. I believe the award will make a lasting difference for future generations. I hope it will lead to my children and others going to school, graduating, getting a good job and making their own community contributions.”



# MY LITTLE DREAMS LED TO BIG DREAMS

Felicia Wesaw – Omaha  
Massage therapist/doula



We often encourage young children to ‘reach for the stars,’ or tell them ‘the sky’s the limit.’ Everyone has dreams, adults included. All of these dreams push people to achieve their goals, learn and grow. I believe this learning allows individuals to grow and reach out to others in their community.

This program only requires a dream and inspiration – that’s what’s so wonderful about it. As a woman who decided to change her career during her mid-40s to become a massage therapist and a doula or childbirth assistant, the grant empowered me, allowed me to continue my education and achieve my goals. It has definitely changed my life.

This sense of achievement and empowerment makes us feel good about ourselves. This program makes dreams come true, and little dreams lead to big dreams. It teaches

us that there is more out there, and our own success encourages us to reach out to others to help them achieve their goals. People need to be encouraged to grow, so they can contribute to the community. Receiving this grant makes me feel like a twinkling star, and that I am not alone.”



*“Receiving this grant makes me feel like a twinkling star, and that I am not alone.”*



Darlene Jackson – Ojibwe  
Story teller/elder

## WE MUST PRESERVE THE WISDOM OF OUR ELDERS



*"I appreciate that  
AIFEP values the  
importance of  
elders.*

*They've gone  
through a lot in  
their lifetimes, and  
have the wisdom  
to help raise their  
children's children."*

"I

was at my sister's house and went outside. I didn't turn the lights on, but looked at the stars and listened to the night sounds. I heard some noise, so I started talking in Ojibwe. I said, 'Come here. I won't hurt you; you can trust me.' A wolf walked around the house and approached me. He came very near; he wasn't showing his teeth or growling, so I reached out to pet him. His fur was thick and beautiful – so soft. I thanked him: 'Migwitch' and he left.

As an elder, I do a lot of cultural and spiritual advising; I try to help people get a better understanding of cultural and spiritual ways, and I have a strong interest in community safety. Years ago, I did drive-alongs

with the Minneapolis police. I enjoyed it, and I was able to teach them about Indian culture, so they can do a better job of working with American Indian people.

Our heritage is important to our development. I am a pipe keeper, and there is a lot of responsibility to the community that goes along with this role. I appreciate that AIFEP values the importance of elders. They've gone through a lot in their lifetimes, and have the wisdom to help raise their children's children. Many Indian people in the Twin Cities are very poor and need the help that AIFEP provides."



# OUR CONNECTIONS HELP US SURVIVE TOUGH TIMES

Georgia Wettlin-Larson –  
Assiniboine/Nakota  
Program Director, First Nations  
Composers Initiative  
American Composers Forum

“*E*veryone faces difficult times during their lives, and often they look toward family for support. The American Indian community and my extended family are integral to my personal and professional success. We always help one another. We’re all connected. This traditional concept has been key to our survival over the centuries. As I work with children throughout the country, performing and lecturing on traditional American Indian music and story programs, I see in their faces, a reaffirmation of their culture, and a renewed sense of pride in being Indian.

When I received the grant, I was facing one of those tough times in my life. It helped me to refocus, to rearrange my priorities in life and helped me re-gain my confidence. It recognized that the work I do for the community has value. The recognition and confidence gave me a motivational boost when I most needed it. I feel uplifted. If I’m having a tough time, I now tell myself: ‘You can do this; you’re strong. Your community is counting on you to do the work you do.’ I just

dig in my heels and do what needs to be done. My peers have recognized me for my work and I feel so honored; I deeply appreciate the recognition.

Tribal people know we need to continue to recognize our traditional values of generosity, respect, and treatment of one another as brothers and sisters. We are all related. By recognizing this, and instilling these values at an individual level, particularly within our young people, we can continue to strengthen our American Indian families. Generosity – we’ve always demonstrated this traditional value in our actions as Indian people. Whatever little we have is shared. If you have a lot, you share more.”



*“Whatever little we have is shared. If you have a lot, you share more.”*



Ron Schwartz - Ojibwe  
Small Business Owner

## A CHANCE TO OWN MY OWN BUSINESS



*"This grant gave me confidence in myself. I learned from the experience and now feel more comfortable going to a bank to ask for the money I need to grow the business."*

*"As* a struggling single father, I started picking up additional jobs for extra money. Before I knew it, I had my own snow removal business. Last year, I decided to make my business official. There was a lot of potential in my business; I just didn't realize it until I was given the opportunity with the grant to expand. I never wanted to be the biggest snow removal business. I just wanted to be able to provide for my family and to help those who are hard to employ or just need some extra money to get by.

This grant, even though it's a small amount of money, gave me the opportunity to build my business. It can be difficult to just walk into a

bank and say I need \$10,000. This grant gave me confidence in myself. I learned from the experience and now feel more comfortable going to a bank to ask for the money I need to grow the business. Right now, I'm totally self-employed. People in my family are amazed. They say, 'Wow!' when they see how far I have come. I even made this look easy to my daughter; now she wants to start a business of her own.

Getting the grant was a friendly process; if you have any questions they will work with you. Usually when you try to get a grant, they think that they can turn you inside out and find out everything about you. Being Indian, I'm often reluctant to open up to everything and say, 'Here I am.' With this grant, there aren't many restrictions. If you have a plan, the money is there and easy to use. I had a need, they had the money, and they met my need."



# A TEAM OF AMERICAN INDIAN LEADERS MAKE AIFEP AWARD DECISIONS

*AIFEP  
Advisory Committee*

*A*pproximately 100 AIFEP grant applications are received on an annual basis, and about half of those are actually funded. Most grant requests are related to educational pursuits, while others relate to professional, personal or cultural development goals.

The AIFEP Advisory Committee is composed of seven American Indian tribal members who have significant leadership experience and knowledge of the Twin Cities American Indian community. They also reflect the diversity of the Twin Cities American Indian community, through their tribal affiliation, location of residence, profession, and socio-economic background.

The Advisory Committee is an autonomous body that ensures the implementation of community-driven and culturally responsive grantmaking. In keeping with American Indian cultural traditions, decision-making is based on a consensus-driven process. The primary responsibilities of the Advisory Committee are to advise foundation staff and board on AIFEP program development and operations, and to engage in grantee selection. The AIFEP Advisory Committee shares a vision of an expanded AIFEP program.

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composed of  
seven  
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experience and  
knowledge of the  
Twin Cities  
American Indian  
community.*

## *The Indian Giver*

*Let there be no purpose in giving  
save reciprocity.  
For to a people whose spirituality  
lies within life's wholeness  
Who share the gifts of the sky and the  
mountains and the seas and the forest  
Who exchange abundance in the circle  
of animal brethren  
Giving is not a matter of pure  
altruism and benevolence  
but a mutual responsibility  
To make the world  
A better place.*

*Rebecca L. Adamson (Cherokee)  
President and Founder  
First Nations Development Institute*



Back row: Valerie Larsen, LaVon Lee, Cris Stainbrook, Carrie Day-Aspinwall. Front row: Renee Beaulieu-Banks and Juanita Espinosa. Not pictured: Tony Looking Elk



*Grotto Foundation*

*5323 Lakeland Avenue North, Suite 100*

*Minneapolis, MN 55429*

*(763) 277-3434 • Fax: (763) 277-3444*

*www.grottofoundation.org*

*info@grottofoundation.org*



*Editorial Direction – Gabrielle Strong, AIFEP administrator and  
Grotto Foundation program officer*

*Editor – Lynn Ingrid Nelson, LIN Public Relations*

*Interviews – Julie Nielsen, Nielsen Consulting*

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*American Indian Family  
Empowerment Program  
A grantmaking  
partnership of the:*

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*Marbrook Foundation*

*A private foundation, established  
in 1948 by longtime Minnesota  
residents Edward and  
Markell C. Brooks, which  
provides grants in the areas of  
environment, education, mind  
and spirit, the arts, social  
empowerment and health.*

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*Westcliff Foundation*

*A foundation of Markell C. Brooks,  
who provided the inspiration and  
impetus for the American Indian  
Family Empowerment Program.*

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*Grotto Foundation*

*A private foundation based on the  
core values of community, family  
and understanding, with a mission  
to support the empowerment and  
well-being of families and culturally  
diverse groups.*

