

Expanding Our Outreach: American Indian Health and Family Services

What does it take for MSUE to expand its outreach and connections to Michigan's diverse communities? Taking a look at the work of Kimbirly Bodfish and others within the Michigan Nutrition Network and the Together We Can parenting program, one would come to the conclusion that it takes intentionality, commitment, time and trust. Kimbirly first explored the opportunity of expanding MSUE's outreach to Michigan's tribal communities with Nick Reo when he served as the American Indian Liaison. Through Nick, Kimbirly visited the American Indian Health and Family Services and was later introduced to Jerilyn Church.



Jerilyn has dedicated nearly twenty years to the advocacy and advancement of integrative health practices for Michigan's tribal community in her roles of both provider and administrator. She has spoken extensively about concerns culturally relevant to American Indian families and their well-being with a passion for bridging the gap of understanding between American Indian and non-Indians. As the director of American Indian Health and Family Services, Jerilyn Church accepted the invitation to partner with Children, Youth, Families and Communities (CYFC) on two projects; one involving the Together We Can parenting program and the other with the Michigan Nutrition Network. These efforts have required thoughtfulness and patience on the part of all involved in order to expand the reach and scope of these CYFC programs.

Through this developing partnership, Jerilyn has challenged individuals to think differently about how programs are designed and offered that are relevant to the urban Native population in Detroit. In one instance, questions arose as to whether or not participants in the nutrition-based programs who were learning about traditional native dances could meet the definition provided by the grantor for "allowable physical activity demonstrations." After engaging in some intentional, authentic and trust-building conversations and education, it was agreed that these demonstrations did fit the definition and that by participating in these culturally relevant dance activities, participants would not only increase physical activity, but would do so in a way that promoted and supported cultural tradition.. Although the road has been rocky at times, the goal of establishing a long-term authentic relationship that sustains CYFC's ability to reach and serve the Native community continues to be the source of strength that has kept our organizations working together; sometimes moving forward, sometimes moving back, but always moving together.

For her continued commitment to these efforts and for helping to support, educate and challenge MSUE in our ongoing efforts to expand our outreach, Jerilyn Church was honored during the 2009 Fall Extension Conference at the Key Partners banquet. For more information on this ongoing partnership with the American Indian Health and Family Services, contact Kimbirly Bodfish at 517-432-2118 or at rindfle2@msu.edu For more information on American Indian Health and Family Services visit <http://www.aihfs.org>.

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