

## ENGAGING A NEW GENERATION OF NATIVE AMERICANS IN CULTURAL AND SOCIAL CHANGE

American Friends Service Committee Wabanaki Youth program  
Perry, Maine

*"We were forced to give up our culture, to give up our language and to give up all our beliefs...That whole piece of you that identifies you as a person is just missing...Kids have to be taught again where they came from."*

Denise Altvater  
Program Director  
American Friends Service Committee Wabanaki Youth Program  
P.O. Box 406  
Perry, ME 04667  
Phone: 207-853-2317  
Email: [wabanaki@ptc-me.net](mailto:wabanaki@ptc-me.net)

**SUMMARY:** For the past decade, **Denise Altvater** and her colleagues have been **reconnecting hundreds of Wabanaki youth** with their culture, religion and traditions. They are working to reverse the poverty, school dropout rates, drug abuse and other damage done by hundreds of years of repression and prejudice. In the process, they are preserving the Wabanaki culture itself. Despite not holding a traditional leadership position, Altvater cultivates several approaches, including the following:

- **Engage in Peaceful Direct Action:** Young people took over the offices of the Tribal Council to protest corrupt leadership and broken promises, leading to regular meetings among them and support for tribal wellness initiatives.
- **Rekindle Native Traditions:** Drumming, sweat lodges, smudging and talking circles are among the traditions the program has revived. The community now practices these more widely.
- **Connect With Other Tribes:** The youth have initiated meetings with other Wabanaki tribes as well as inter-tribal events in Maine and Canada. These are opportunities to learn about issues like drug and alcohol awareness, and enable young people to learn from key elders.
- **Recognize Challenges:** The challenges of poverty, substance abuse and other issues cannot be overstated. When the young people who took over the Tribal Council committed to staying drug and alcohol free, they were better able to confront the council elders about their addictions and engage in dialogue.

The following case example describes these approaches and others:

## **“WE HAVE TO REACH BACK”**

### **American Friends Service Committee Wabanaki Youth Program**

#### **Story based on materials collected in Spring 2003**

Writer: Jonathan Walters

Co-researchers: Denise Altvater (Award Recipient) and Jennifer Dodge  
(NYU/LCW)

In a culture that seems to have long since lost its way, it was nothing short of revolution in reconnection for the community. In 1995, twenty-eight Wabanaki Indian youth on the Perry Point Reservation in Perry, Maine, decided to take over the offices of their local Tribal Council and "drum" in protest of what they viewed as years of corrupt leadership and broken promises. Locking themselves in the council's headquarters, the young protesters resisted repeated demands by council members and by two-dozen state, local and tribal police officers to give themselves up. As the standoff grew tenser, community support for the youngsters actually increased. After three days, a group of thirty-five tribal women appeared and drummed their way into the building to reinforce the youngsters. "After that, the Tribal Council had no alternative but to meet with us," says Denise Altvater, who runs the American Friends Service Committee Wabanaki Youth Program, and who was inside with the young protesters. "Threats of force had become offers of discussion."

It was a remarkable showing of activism in a culture that has been ravaged by all the worst consequences of reservation life: joblessness, alcohol and drug addiction, domestic violence, educational failure and the pervasive feeling of deep hopelessness and listlessness that come with such pathologies. "What we've done is try to come up with projects that get kids involved with their history and traditions," says Altvater, "that really pertain to their communities." In working with kids and getting them more involved, Altvater hopes to answer a critical question that has ramifications across tribal America: Can an individual who is not in a traditional leadership position build momentum to create change in a marginalized community?

#### **Deep-rooted troubles**

The challenges faced by the Wabanakis—a loose confederacy of four tribes in Maine and Canada, the Mi'kmaq, Maliseet, Penobscot and Passamaquoddy—are considerable. In Washington County, Maine, home to the Perry Point Reservation, the annual per capita income is under \$10,000, with an average of around \$6,500 for reservation residents. The unemployment rate hovers above 60 percent, and nearly 30 percent of those on the reservation live below the poverty level. The high school dropout rate is 30 percent. For all Native Americans, the average educational attainment level is eighth grade. One third to one half of Wabanaki Indians age 15 to 30 abuse alcohol or drugs. At the same time, 40 percent of the Native American population in Maine is under age 18, which is one of the main reasons why Altvater turned her attention to working with kids and young adults.

In teaching today's American Indian youth about Wabanaki culture (Wabanaki means "people of the dawn"), Altvater and her allies have for the past decade been trying to reverse the damage done by hundreds of years of cultural repression and prejudice; repression and prejudice that manifested itself in the wholesale removal of generations of Wabanaki children to non-Native foster homes, job and educational discrimination and even violence. "Mine is the next

generation," says a volunteer with Wabanaki Friends, "We want to show our people, including our elders and our parents, that we can pull things together, that we are leaders."

### **"Church in the fields"**

Because many of the reservation elders have known only reservation life and the low employment and educational achievement, and high drug and alcohol abuse rates that have plagued the tribe for decades, a particularly destructive dynamic has been established on reservations: Tribal leadership is often corrupt or simply incompetent. Meanwhile, there is actually a deep mistrust among many elders when it comes to the notion of returning to some of the old ways. While Altvater's charges are rekindling such native traditions as drumming, sweat lodges, and "smudging"—a cleansing done with sacred medicines and an eagle feather—as a way to reconnect with their more powerful cultural past, many of their elders have long since turned to decidedly non-native ways, including conversion to such Western religions as Catholicism. "They don't understand it when you get up early in the morning and go outside to offer up tobacco and pray," says another volunteer who works with Altvater, and also one of a handful of reservation elders supporting the push to recapture the Wabanaki ways. "There is one elder who when I asked if she wanted to go to a sunrise ceremony would say yes. But most would say, 'I'm not going to go to church out in a field."

### **Reconnecting hundreds into one**

As part of the AFSC Wabanaki Youth Program's push to reconnect tribal youth with their lost culture, religion and traditions, Altvater and the team of volunteers she has assembled have been knitting together members of all four Wabanaki tribes. She successfully pushed to combine the youth programs of five Maine reservations, at the same time helping turn activities away from the traditional focus on sports to one that embraces all youngsters and all sorts of different activities, whether it is local drumming ceremonies or national convocations, such as the annual National AFSC Indigenous Youth Gathering, which the AFSC Wabanaki Youth Program helps organize. The AFSC Wabanaki Youth Program has also organized an annual Youth Wellness Institute and helped create the Wabanaki Youth Alliance, which trains and counsels young Wabanaki in a variety of issues, from drug and alcohol awareness to suicide prevention. The AFSC Wabanaki Youth Program also has delegates to the Youth Steering Committee, a national committee of all Native American advocacy programs, and which serves as the planning arm for the annual indigenous youth gathering. "It's a matter of working with a lot of kids and teaching them leadership and teaching them they have this beautiful culture, and it's right there and they should learn more about it and not let it go," says a volunteer.

To deal with issues outside of their own world—especially the sort of rampant prejudice that the Wabanakis have experienced in schools—the AFSC Wabanaki Youth Program also organizes student exchange programs with non-native educational institutions throughout the northeast. To deal with the very real impact of prejudice in the current, adult culture, the program has also conducted anti-racism training with local county jail guards, as well as state social services employees.

The AFSC Wabanaki Youth Program also organizes and participates in regular inter-tribal events and ceremonies in Maine and Canada, which offer a particularly rich opportunity for youngsters to learn from key Wabanaki elders who have been working to keep the cultural flame alive. As

part of these gatherings, runners carry a sacred flame from community to community in the days just ahead of the meeting. "It's just the lead up activity to an event that includes all aspects of traditional Wabanaki culture", says a Wabanaki youth. "You have to call your drummer in to sing the songs so people can dance. You have to call in your pipe carriers and your medicine carriers." It is a lot of work, she says, but the work is worth it. "The first one was a wonderful revival because the confederacy had been dead for 100 years. Now it rotates from community to community."

### **Tension and "talking circles"**

Pushing such programs is not easy, however. Initially, bringing such gatherings back to life met with some internal resistance. "Some elders were accusing us of 'devil worship,'" says Altvater. And others were offended because they saw the confederacy gatherings as supplanting the established annual "Indian Days" celebration held on the reservation. "They were saying, 'What we do isn't good enough for you?'" says Altvater. But even among those trying to recapture the culture, and those who believe they have been keeping it, there can be conflicts. "There was an old Mi'kmaq man from Canada, a pipe carrier and sweat lodge keeper, and he wouldn't let women drum in their community," says Altvater.

But out of such conflict has come the rekindling of another lost Wabanaki tradition: "talking circles," where all interested—or aggrieved parties—gather in a circle to hash such issues out. "Talkers" enter the ring and say their piece. "In talking circles, you just sit together and tell everyone how you feel," says a Wabanaki youth. "You work things out." In the case of the Mi'kmaq man, a talking circle revealed a much broader acceptance among tribal elders of women and non-natives taking part in traditionally male, traditionally Wabanaki-only ceremonies than people initially would have suspected. "One well-known elder in particular stood up and said he had a lot of respect for the young people standing up for what they believed. And he said when he runs a sweat lodge, it is open to everybody, native, non-native, black, men, women. That kind of turned things around," says Altvater.

### **Giant challenges remain**

While such rekindling of tradition has captured—and helped sustain—key portions of the Wabanaki's future leadership, the problems that continue to face the tribe can't be understated. Many in the current youth culture feel completely disenfranchised. "My generation started learning what the Catholic Church did to Native people," says Altvater. "So the kids now, they haven't found their Native beliefs and traditions and they don't go to church, so they haven't found anything. They have zero." "And they use drugs to fill the void," says a Wabanaki youth. Drug and alcohol abuse continue to ravage the community, with astronomical addiction rates continuing to plague the tribe. "Sometimes you feel almost hopeless," says Altvater. "The chances of someone getting off drugs once they're hooked is so low. But you can't ever give up on anybody."

Ironically—or perhaps fittingly—it was in that spirit that the young Wabanki protesters who had occupied the tribal council headquarters in 1995 entered the talking circle as the standoff with tribal elders and police evolved into a meeting between tribal youth and tribal elders. "After six hours of talking, the council made a number of commitments," says Altvater. "To meet with the youth once a month, and to support tribal wellness initiatives." At the same time, the twenty-

eight youngsters who occupied the building committed themselves to staying drug and alcohol free, even as they confronted the council elders about their addictions. "One of the council members, an alcoholic, broke down in tears and spoke of his own despair," says Altvater. "It was at that point that threats disappeared from the discussion. The council even agreed to smudge and pray before every council meeting."

Still Altvater and her colleagues at AFCS Wabanaki Youth Program have no illusions about what it is going to take to turn life around for the Wabanaki people. "We were forced to give up our culture, to give up our language and to give up all our beliefs, and then not only forced to do that, but forced into a different church and a different culture," says Altvater. "It's like taking a whole chunk of a person and throwing it away. That whole piece of you that identifies you as a person is just missing. Kids look around the reservation and all they see is their parents on welfare and on drugs. I think we have to reach back. We have to teach kids about the struggles that brought us here. Kids have to be taught again where they came from."

Since it began, the AFCS Wabanaki Program has touched the lives—and the spirits—of nearly 1,000 kids and in doing so has introduced a new generation of Native Americans to their lost culture, the culture that Altvater, her allies and her young charges believe hold the key to the Wabanaki's very survival.

### **Spring 2003**