

## CREATING ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES AND REBUILDING PUBLIC HEALTH, THROUGH REVIVING TRIBAL TRADITIONS

Tohono O'odham Community Action  
Sells, AZ

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**SUMMARY:** The Tohono O'odham Nation is rebounding after generations of poverty, disease and crime. Tristan Reader, Terrol Johnson, and their colleagues at Tohono O'odham Community Action engage community members in healthy and economically profitable **tribal traditions**. This includes growing traditional food and basket-weaving. **Rooted in the will, interests, and culture of the community**, their strategies and priorities include the following:

- **Weave Together Connected Areas of Action:** Programs include a basket-weavers' collective, a food system redevelopment program, an elder to youth program, and arts and culture activities. All of these projects encourage learning about cultural traditions. Most require exercise, which is critical to reverse declining community health. "It's like spokes in a wheel," says Tristan Reader, of the connections among the organization's programs. "You remove one and the whole is weakened because they all interrelate."
- **Develop an Independent Community Base:** Tohono O'odham Community Action is independent. This enables it to avoid challenging government or tribal authority and allows for a stronger organization. The group also develops its programs based on what the community says it wants and needs. According to Co-Director and tribe member Terrol Johnson, community members were used to programs that were based on funding or on people who would come in, then move on when the funding ran out. "But it was a little different this time," he says, "because I was able to say, 'I'm from the community and I ain't going anywhere.'"
- **Create Opportunities for Traditions to Emerge:** Reconnecting to elders and ceremonies opens ways to learn about other traditions, such as the great traditional games of the Tohono O'odham. Young people now learn the games and play them at established youth recreation centers.

In the following case example, Terrol Johnson, Tristan Reader, and their colleagues describe how their programs are helping to reverse a cultural freefall:

## **COMMUNITY ACTION, NATURALLY**

### **Tohono O'odham Community Action**

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*"And when the plants are growing again, you talk to them, you pray to encourage the growth of the plants, because whether you can survive or not depends on whether they grow or not."*

– Danny Lopez, TOCA activist

### **"To Help Them Survive"**

In 1996, the Tohono O'odham Nation in Southern Arizona was in the midst of a freefall. The tribe was experiencing the lowest per capita income witnessed on any Native American reservation. More than 65 percent of the tribe members were living below the poverty line, with 70 percent of adult tribe members unemployed. More than half of Tohono O'odham adults suffered adult-onset diabetes, the highest rate in the world. Life expectancy for tribe members was six years shorter than for the average American. The homicide rate for the tribe was three times the national average and twice the average for other Native American communities. Crime among juveniles was skyrocketing, due almost exclusively to gang activity. The high school dropout rate among Tohono O'odham youth was over 50 percent. Meanwhile, fewer than half of the Tohono O'odham community's adults had completed high school, the lowest rate of any U.S. tribe. The bottom line, say Tohono O'odham community activists: the tribe—its culture, its language, its art, its customs and traditions; in fact, its very existence—were all hanging in the balance.

The causes of the freefall were all too familiar: a loss of self-sufficiency encouraged by increasing dependence on welfare and food stamps; a loss of cultural connection due to the easy influences of 20<sup>th</sup> century pop culture, delivered mostly by television. In addition, there was a loss of health and connection to the land thanks to the loss of the traditional food system, which was undermined by federal food programs, boarding schools, and easily available non-traditional foods. Federal food programs replaced self-sufficiency with dependency; boarding schools interrupted the inter-generational sharing of knowledge and skills. The tribe, meanwhile, was also wrestling with the ravages of drugs and alcohol so prevalent in communities with high levels of poverty and hopelessness. "I tell people, the youth and the adults, 'We're going to live like other people and the cost is our culture,'" says Danny Lopez, a tribe member and TOCA activist. "It's what we call 'Himdag.' Our language. Our ceremonies. Because we're trying to act like other people. And if we lose our culture, we'll be in a bad situation."

It was against that backdrop that a beneficial partnership of unlikely community activists took place, a partnership that would see the first glimmers of hope for saving a tribe that for generations had been losing its ways and its way.

It was in the spring of 1996 that Tristan Reader, whose wife was a local Presbyterian Church minister at the time, just happened to overhear a conversation his wife was having with Terrol Johnson, a Tohono O'odham tribe member. Johnson, who had been working in his own modest way to restore the tribe's basket-making tradition, had received a request for proposal from the

Arizona Commission on the Arts. Johnson had wanted to expand his weaving classes. One strong impetus for expanding the class was to give kids something to do after school, an imperative made all the more pressing by a recent gang fight on the reservation during which six kids had been stabbed. Shortly after the stabbings, Johnson says two boys approached him, "And one of them literally said to me, 'You said you were going to start to do stuff after school. Are you really going to? Because'—and he said this flat out—I'm going to have to make choices.'" The choice to which the boy was alluding was clear, says Johnson. It was either Johnson's after-school program or joining a gang. "That was a moment when we really said, 'We have to do something.'"

But there were no tribal resources with which to start any after-school program, says Johnson, which is why the Arts Commission grant loomed so large. "I knew nothing about grants. But I wanted to teach and pass it on to the younger ones. To help them know who they are. To help them survive." Reader remembers the conversation well, along with his reaction to it. Although he didn't really know Johnson very well—"I was the weird white guy out in the garden," laughs Reader—"I was, like, 'Why didn't I hear about this earlier? I'll help. I'll help.'"

The result was a \$2,000 grant and the beginning of a partnership aimed at doing much more than restoring a tribal craft tradition. It was a partnership that would blossom into Tohono O'odham Community Action, a grassroots effort to help a tribe that was losing its footing get back on its traditional cultural path. In doing that, the fledgling organization would begin weaving together four basic areas of action: creating a basket-weavers' cooperative aimed at restoring a once-proud—and potentially profitable—arts tradition; setting up a gardening and food program to begin reconnecting the tribe to the land, to work, to their culture, and ultimately to healthier living and eating habits; an elder to youth program so that tribal elders could pass along songs, stories and traditions to new generations; and an arts and culture program aimed at rebuilding tribal pride and cutting down on delinquency by giving tribal youth the opportunity to participate in such traditional activities as story telling, games, and oral history projects.

### **To Support the Earth and Its People**

While TOCA would appear to be pursuing four seemingly separate program areas, TOCA activists point out that it is an artificial construct driven by funding imperatives. In reality, everything is connected to everything else, they say. The gardening program, for example, helps teach the virtues of work, while also encouraging tribal members to both get physically active and eat better. "So we try to encourage people to do gardens," says Danny Lopez, who formerly headed TOCA's food program. "But a garden doesn't grow by itself. You have to work it, just like you care for a little kid. And that's a mindset that is slow to change. We're used to getting handouts, with rations and food stamps and so forth. So you have people getting back to eating healthy and not only that, but working, exercising, being industrious, learning the value of sharing. Our people used to share a long time ago, whether it's food or their time, their labor. It teaches respect for the land. Everything to support the earth and its people."

In returning to the land, the tribe began reconnecting to much more than just the earth, however. Elders would help teach the ways of past agricultural practice, including which crops were traditionally grown and how they were prepared and stored and how seeds were gathered and stored. It would mean relearning about the wild vegetation used both for food and for making baskets,, which were traditionally used to gather food. "It's like spokes in a wheel," says Reader.

"You remove one and the whole thing is weakened because they all interrelate. About five years ago we helped bring back the Jujkida, the rain ceremony, to a village where it hadn't been done in 30 years."

In reconnecting to elders and the ceremonies they had learned about when they were young, other traditions began to emerge. The Tohono O'odham, for example, were great games-players, including running relays and a field-hockey forerunner known as "toka." "And we would go around and ask different elders about some of the games," says TOCA staffer Summer Flores. "There's a big gap even for us adults. We didn't really know about the games. It was like they skipped a couple of generations. So the elders helped re-teach those generations that it had passed over."

After learning enough about traditional games, says Flores, TOCA approached some of the established youth recreation centers to see about collaborating on melding the old with the new. The recreation centers, she says, were very receptive. "When the youth first hear about the traditional Tohono O'odham games they think, 'That sounds boring. I mean, it's not a Game Boy and it's not like basketball.' But it's our traditional game and now that they've learned it, they play it and we found that kids like it. And so now they're wanting to learn different games."

Farming, work, rain ceremonies, story telling, basket-making and games all began to fuse together into one, say Tohono O'odham supporters.

### **Rooted in Community**

As these connections started to be rekindled, various activities and events began to naturally flow from the overriding goal of rebuilding tribal heritage and pride. Most important, say Reader and Johnson, was that TOCA's actions and initiatives had their roots directly in what the community wanted, not what the organization wanted to give to the community. "I think it's just about listening and taking it to heart," says Johnson. Adds Reader, "It's like an eastern chief once said, 'I couldn't make an unpopular decision because if I did, no one would follow me.' We were willing to listen and really let community members make the decisions about what we were going to do."

"So often it's about programs," continues Reader. "It's all mapped out. 'Here's what we're going to do and here's how we're going to do it. Get on board people.' But that's not how it is with TOCA. We didn't have a ten-year plan. It's just all kind of developed naturally." For example, the idea of rekindling traditional games was more or less spontaneous and driven by community interest, not a preconceived effort by TOCA, says Reader and Johnson. "We just saw these other people playing them and we just thought, 'Why don't we just get everybody together and do something like that?'" says Johnson. "So it's everybody's ideas going into the pot and seeing what comes out."

The grassroots nature of TOCA initiatives has been the hallmark of the group's success. After decades of being dictated to, cared for, and programmed, it was very important, say Reader and Johnson, that whatever TOCA does flows from community will and interest. Not only does that make for a stronger organization, it allows TOCA to sidestep potentially tricky tribal political questions, which was especially important early on in the organization's evolution. Rather than challenging or usurping official tribal authority—as organized under the reservation system—

TOCA simply provided an avenue and an outlet for rekindling the original tribal spirit. "For so long, every program has been a government program—either tribal or federal. But we were independent and community based. And that's something that hadn't existed here," says Reader.

It wasn't an easy concept for tribe members to understand at first, admits Johnson. "We had a lot of people questioning what we were doing. In our community people had a tendency to step back and just observe. And a program will come along and it will go for a few months and then doors will be shut because people move on or the funding runs out. So I think a lot of people were used to that when we came along. But it was a little different this time because I was able to say, 'I'm from the community and I ain't going anywhere.'"

### **Making the Desert Blossom**

While TOCA's programs and direction may not be tightly mapped out, the ground-level action and accomplishments of the group are considerable. The group now operates two large farms that grow traditional crops. "Traditional farming in this area had completely disappeared in the last century," says Paul Buseck, who researched his agricultural Masters thesis on rekindling native crops while helping TOCA on its fledgling farming project. "And this summer (2004) they're harvesting thousands of pounds of beans and melons and other crops." According to Buseck's research, O'odham farming covered some 20,000 acres, and produced 1.6 million pounds of tepary beans in 1930. Before TOCA's push to rebuild tribal agricultural production, there was less than two acres of traditional crops in production; tepary bean production was almost negligible. By the summer of 2004, TOCA had over 80 acres planted, and expected over 100,000 lbs. of traditional foods (teparry beans and others vegetables) to be ready for community consumption.

TOCA has created a basket-weavers' collective, which has proved a boon, both to rekindling what was a dying art, and to restoring a sense of pride and value to the practice - literally in some cases. "It's been amazing to hear the stories of the basket-weavers," says Rhonda Wilson, a program associate with TOCA. "They're just amazed at what TOCA would pay for their baskets. I remember one lady in particular who came in and she had all these horsehair baskets and she wanted three dollars for all of them and they were nice! Well, she walked out with a check for \$500. And tears were running down her face and she said she never knew because a lot of times weavers don't think what they do is worth much."

In addition to such ongoing efforts, TOCA sponsors an annual basket-weavers conference—now the largest in the country. They participate in an annual wellness conference. And they continue to stage multi-day tribal celebrations in the desert where elders, youth, and everyone in between gather to tell stories, practice their native language, play games, learn about native plants and grasses, and generally reconnect to their culture and to each other.

### **Living in Two Worlds**

In the end, says Danny Lopez, he understands that the Tohono O'odham have to live in two worlds. He strongly advocates that kids stay in school and get what would be considered a western education. "But if we don't hang on to what we have, it's going to be like only one world in the future. And if we lose our culture, it's not a good sign. Then who will we be?"

"It's about getting up and turning off the TV," says Lopez. "Or going out for a walk. It's about the joy of a meal made of the corn or the tepary beans or squash that you grew. It's about the benefits of working with your hands. Of planting from seed. It's about becoming independent. It's about keeping kids out of trouble, keeping them away from the darkness. In the summer, you're busy planting and then in the fall, harvesting. In November, there's a little time to meet with other communities and play games—footraces, kickball or the handgame [a traditional Tohono O'odham game of chance played with carved sticks]. In December, you sit around the fire and talk and tell stories."

It is a vision that those associated with TOCA acknowledge will not be realized overnight. "It's a matter of working slowly toward the larger vision," says Paul Buseck, "of thinking ahead and making sure that what you have going right now stays up and running and that it works slowly towards that bigger vision."

"I remember this six-year old girl who came to the garden and noticed the seeds just starting to grow," says Reader. "And that's what I feel is happening with TOCA. We planted the seeds and they're just starting to sprout."

Slowly, say Tohono O'odham activists, the tribe is beginning to turn things around. Basket-weavers have stayed organized and focused and now command fair market prices for the work that they used to virtually give away. Observers note a significantly healthier diet and lifestyle working its way back into tribal habits. Enough interest has been rekindled in both the agricultural and dietary heritage of the tribe that there is now traditional Tohono O'odham food available in local stores across the reservation, which advocates believe will not only continue strengthening cultural roots, but also help begin bringing down tribal diabetes rate. At the same time, the tribal-wide athletic competition—akin to the Olympics—is back to its traditional, annual schedule and is drawing increasing numbers of participants, which has also contributed to a healthier lifestyle by rekindling traditional culture while promoting physical exercise.

Perhaps most important, upcoming generations of Tohono O'odham children seem to be dealing in a much more positive way with the fact that "they walk in two worlds," as Danny Lopez puts it: the modern world with all of its pressures and distractions; and the traditional Tohono O'odham world with its rich traditions. Others have noticed the same thing. Tristan Reader says he sensed the change a few years ago. He was walking a young girl home after an after-school arts and community garden program. "Her mom came out and just gave me this big hug and thanked me for all the things that were happening there. When you get that response, you know that people—not everyone—but you know that people see the good."

**December 2004**