

# Dream of Wild Health: Improving Health, Nutrition and Well Being in Native Communities

## *Part III of Healing Minnesota Stories Native Voices Series*

Dream of Wild Health started as a program of Peta Wakan Tipi, a transitional housing program for Native people in recovery. Around 2000, clients asked for a way to reconnect with the land. They wanted a place to bring their family and let their children learn about traditional foods and medicines. They knew the land was an important part of their healing. The idea started taking shape on a half acre of land in Farmington. Today, Dream of Wild Health operates a 10-acre farm outside of Hugo. It has three programs: Saved Seeds (to preserve indigenous, pre-colonization seeds), 2) an organic market garden, and 3) education programs, including healthy cooking and eating classes, and Native youth employment and training. Executive Director Diane Wilson spoke about the importance of food to health and healing. She was accompanied by teen leaders Trinity Wagner and Jalen Morrison. Here are key takeaways from Wilson's talk. A video will be posted soon on our website.



**Food is central to culture and healing:** The most important thing that I learned at Dream of Wild Health is that food is at the center of our culture. Our songs and ceremonies have been associated with how we plant, how we grow, and how we share our food. For us to maintain a strong cultural identity, we have to pay attention to our food and our relationship to the land. As we deal with historical trauma, one of the most profound ways we can do that healing work is through our relationship with the land.

**Food and Native spirituality— We are all related:** In pre-contact years, our diet was made up of wild game and seasonal, nutritionally dense, whole foods. Tribes developed a sophisticated understanding of foods, the land, and the seasonal cycles. You knew the plants, the animals, and the cycles of your water. You knew what was going to be ready to harvest and how to manage your wildlife. This way of living meant that you were deeply connected to the land itself. Part of that is reflected in the way we have developed our spirituality. In Dakota we have a term: Mitakuye Oyasin. It means we are all related. All of us as Native people have a responsibility to be good relatives to all of these beings. All of these beings have a spirit. This is a fundamental belief in native spirituality.

**Native people have a rich agricultural tradition:** While Minnesota tribes were primarily wild gatherers and hunters, it is important to remember that tribes throughout the America's contributed three fifths of the world's crops. That is food we take for granted—potatoes, tomatoes, peppers, squash, pumpkins, and corn. Corn is everywhere. But maize is corn's ancestor. It is grown everywhere in Minnesota today. We have to give credit to the skilled agriculturalists that Native peoples have always been.

**A change in agriculture, a decline in health:** The clash of cultures begun in 1492 was as much about how we grow food as it was about language, land or spirituality. As settlers arrived, they plowed under the tall grass prairie. This brought in an entirely new agriculture system and relationship with the land. When millions of acres of diverse plants were plowed under, they often were replaced by a monoculture. As native plants disappeared, the animals began to move out, too. The food system began to shift. Native peoples were moved onto reservations and given high fat, high starch commodity foods. Their lifestyles became more sedentary. Diabetes and preventable diseases like heart disease began to escalate. One of the reasons we do the work we do at Dream of Wild Health is because of the high rates

of diabetes: 17% of American Indians have Type 2 Diabetes, the highest rate of any group. There has been a 110% increase in diabetes from 1994-2009 for Native youth ages 15-19.

**Manifest Destiny and the commercial seed industry:** When you invest in a monoculture, that crop becomes vulnerable to disease and pests. To prevent that, you have to use a lot of fertilizer and pesticides. That depletes your soil and pollutes your water. We also see more use of genetically modified (GMO) seeds. In pre-colonial times, we didn't have a commercial seed industry. Seeds were for everyone and widely shared. Now, 150 years later, we have companies like Monsanto who have created a worldwide commercial seed industry. That is creating a form of genetic Manifest Destiny. The intention is to control our seed wealth. We cannot afford to have Monsanto, Cargill and Dupont control our food system. They can destroy not only our food but our environment. The food choices we make are creating the world that we live in. If you are eating processed food, you are eating food grown with GMO seeds. What is on your plate today has huge implications for the world that our children inherit.

**Saved Seeds—the heart of the work:** In its early years, a Potawatomi elder named Cora Baker approached Dream of Wild Health. She was a keeper of indigenous seeds. She was in her 90s and didn't know what to do with them, so she gifted them to the farm. They now are at the heart of what the farm does. We believe that these seeds are our ancestors. It is our responsibility to take care of them, grow them out, and return them to the community. One of the seeds that we grow is called the Cherokee Trail of Tears corn, carried on the original Trail of Tears. We did a corn trial with the University of Minnesota to increase the seed stock. We also did nutrition testing, comparing our crops to conventional varieties. You don't hear about the tradeoffs made to hybridize plants. To make corn more resistant to some pest, for instance, they might trade off the nutritional value. The hybrid corn we eat today has the nutritional value of a donut. This was not true of indigenous corn.

**Problems with contamination from commercial seeds:** Corn and squash are wind pollinated. If we want to preserve those seeds with their genetic integrity—which we do—then we have to hand pollinate. With corn, we use what we call “corn condoms” so that they are not being pollinated by any other species in the area. Our farm is surrounded by commercial corn. If Monsanto's GMO seeds drift into our corn, we can be sued for stealing patented material. It gives you an idea about how much our society has been rigged to protect corporations like Monsanto.

**The old seeds are not for sale:** One of our fundamental beliefs is that we don't sell any seeds. We regard the seeds as sacred, as our ancestors. They are only for food use or for sharing with the community, or for re-growing the inventory until we get to the point where we can share it back out. We only have 10 acres; we have a lot of seeds. We have a partnership with Shakopee [Wozupi Farm](#), and also the Science Museum, and we are working with local growers to grow out the seeds, those we know who can maintain a controlled environment. It is a complex project.

**Market garden and classes support the farm and health:** We sell our produce in two city markets as a way of providing access to healthy food. We are trying to help people in our community learn a different relationship to the land and to food. It can be challenging to persuade people to try different foods. We sell at farmers markets that are convenient for Native families. We have very affordable prices. We work with organizations to provide vouchers. For instance, the American Indian Family Center will work with the women in their Mother's Circle to go to the market to buy their own food. They then come back for a cooking program at the Center. This is a way of giving people access. We find that the cooking issue can be a real barrier. In the fall we do traditional cooking classes teaching hominy, canning and food preservation.

**No plans to expand, but to replicate:** One year we had 150 applications for 28 slots. That was heartbreaking. However, we have a van that holds 14. That has determined the size of the summer youth program. And that is also a nice size. That is a fair number of teenagers to give them the one-on-one time and support. And the teaching kitchen is not set up to hold a very big group. We are interested in helping other organizations start a program. We are happy to provide and advise on how we have done it. ... We are working on a printed curriculum. For us to really pass this on as a model, we need a written curriculum. We are working on that.

**Adding a bee meadow:** Three years ago, with the help of the North American Water Office, we were able to put in 200 berry plants: chokecherries, wild plum, elderberries, juneberries, buffaloberries, strawberries, raspberries—we now have an orchard. We have one last section on the farm that hasn't been used, and it is going to become a bee meadow this year. We are restoring prairie in a way that includes a lot of medicine plants and supports native bees. We do have honeybees, because we like the honey, but native bees are much better at pollinating our plants. It is important for us to support the bees in that area, especially because bees are under a great threat. In the medicinal garden, we grow the four sacred medicines: cedar, sweet grass, tobacco and sage along with common ones, such as echinacea and tansy, a woman's medicine. We don't have a staff herbalist.

**Youth programs:** The youth programs are among the most gratifying work we do at the farm. One of the things I learned from founder Sally Auger when I first started is that we're doing this work for our youth. They are our future. Just as those seeds are the future, if we don't teach our kids this information—how to grow their food, how to cook their food, and how to be healthy, then we haven't done our job as adults or elders. We have programs that teach them about seed saving, about traditional agriculture, and about organic farming. We teach them how their ancestors stayed healthy, the foods that they ate, and the activities they took part in. We teach them about the seasonal cycle of foods, about maple sugar in the spring, about cultivating in the summer, gathering wild plants, about harvesting your wild rice in the fall. We have two summer sessions of our Garden Warriors Apprenticeship Program for youth 13 to 18. Once you've been a Garden Warrior, you can progress to become a youth leader, doing community advocacy during the year. We also have a program for Cora's Kids ages 8 to 12, that's two weeks in the summer and they're learning more age-appropriate lessons about healthy snacks and basic gardening.

**Youth Leader Trinity Wagner:** Trinity is a freshman and said she initially applied "because I wanted to help my grandma with groceries and pay for my school supplies." She learned about Dream of Wild Health through school. When she came to the program, "I was really broken about adults, because they would treat me badly. ... I didn't really trust adults." She was scared to start the program, but when she got there, they showed her that they cared about her and wanted to know how she was doing. "They taught me how to be healthy, and not fill my life with cursing and bad habits and bad eating," she said. "They really changed my life. That is why I come back."

**Youth Leader Jalen Morrison:** Jalen has been with Dream of Wild Health since he was 12 as a Garden Warrior. He got interested in native plants while attending Anishinabe Academy. He wanted to work at Dream of Wild Health to learn more about Native plants and healthy eating. And, because of problems he was having at the time, he wanted space from his family. Dream of Wild Health "became my little Garden of Eden; it gave me a little paradise away from my social life and my home," he said. "I met a lot of great people that taught me so much and helped me grow as a person. I learned about a lot of healthy foods." He brought some of the ideas home, and eventually started a garden with his mom and dad. Today, he is encouraging his friends to apply.