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Akimel O’odham/Pee-Posh Youth Council Gila River Indian Community (Sacaton, Arizona)

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Chartered under the laws of the Gila River Indian Community, the Akimel O’odham/Pee-Posh Youth Council gives youth a formal voice in tribal governance and prepares the next generation of leadership. Comprised of twenty young leaders between the ages of fourteen and twenty-one, who are elected by their peers to serve two-year terms, the Youth Council advises the Tribal Government on a diverse range of issues including youth delinquency, substance abuse, and teen pregnancy. In addition, the Youth Council engages tribal youth in a variety of initiatives that enhance understanding of and participation in tribal public service.

Of the nearly 16,985 tribal citizens in the Gila River Indian Community, half are under the age of eighteen. Like Indian youth elsewhere, Gila River youth are challenged by a host of problems. Gang violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and teen pregnancy are particularly acute on the 372,000-acre reservation, which borders the cities of Tempe, Phoenix, Mesa, and Chandler. Until the late 1980s, however, Gila River youth had little or no say in crafting policy responses to these and other matters affecting their population. In fact, many youth were disillusioned with or simply didn’t understand their tribal government. This was the result, in part, of the government’s own attitude about youth and their role in the Community. As one leader acknowledged, “the tribal government has always focused on the elders, but youth and their issues were historically overlooked.”

Frustrated by their lack of power and influence in Community affairs, several Gila River youth organized the Akimel O’odham/Pee-Posh Youth Council (Youth Council) in 1987. Formed as a small, grassroots organization, the Youth Council sought to establish a voice for youth within the tribal government and to increase the level of communication and respect between adults and youth. Organizers quickly discovered, however, that the successful pursuit of these goals would require the tribal government’s involvement. Consequently, they began soliciting the support of tribal leaders, educators, and government officials. It was an effort that paid off quickly: In October 1988, the Youth Council was officially chartered under the laws of the Gila River Indian Community. The youth were granted a formal voice in tribal government.

Today, the Youth Council consists of twenty representatives between the ages of fourteen and twenty-one. Two youth represent each of the Community’s seven districts and six youth represent the Gila River Indian Community at large. To become a member of the Youth Council, interested individuals must complete a rigorous and competitive nomination, application, and election process. Youth Council members serve two-year terms, which are staggered to help ensure continuity in leadership and membership. To enhance their

effectiveness as representatives of the Gila River Indian Community, Youth Council members undergo substantial leadership training in public speaking, writing, teambuilding, self-esteem development, parliamentary procedures, and conflict resolution. Youth Council members also abide by a strict, self-defined and self-administered code of ethics that is intended to hold members to standards commensurate with the leadership positions that they occupy.

As elected representatives who serve the interest of their peers, Youth Council members possess significant public service responsibilities. They communicate regularly with other youths to identify and understand the myriad of issues, concerns, and challenges that children, teens, and young adults encounter. They formulate policy stances and debate them with their fellow Youth Council members at regularly scheduled meetings, and they present their ideas and policy solutions to the Community's elected leadership and other tribal government officials. In addition to these responsibilities, Youth Council members are expected to organize and participate in Community activities and events. For instance, the Youth Council provides technical assistance to other youth organizations on the reservation, and its members regularly volunteer at school and social events. Moreover, members of the Youth Council participate in local, state, regional, and national conferences and seminars as presenters, moderators, and panelists on issues pertaining to youth and youth/adult relationships. Although these responsibilities are extremely time-consuming, Youth Council members embrace them with a profound sense of duty and appreciation.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the Youth Council has a long list of accomplishments spanning its fourteen years of existence. The sheer number of participants and beneficiaries is impressive. Since the Council's creation, more than three hundred youths have served on the Youth Council itself, while more than eight thousand youth and Community members have been involved in its program activities. The Youth Council has coordinated fifteen leadership conferences, conducted a series of youth leadership development seminars, represented youth in dozens of conferences, and provided substantive input on a wide range of issues to tribal decision makers.

A number of examples highlight the depth and breadth of the Youth Council's achievements. In 1993, the Youth Council spearheaded Kids Voting, a program that prepares youth for an active civic life by allowing them to "vote" on tribal election days. Remarkably, tribal leaders credit a 7 percent increase in adult voter turnout to the program, which, by design, locates the mock polls next to the real polls and, thus, encourages greater adult voting. In 1996, the Youth Council also spearheaded the development of the first Boys and Girls Club serving a Native American community in Arizona, a particularly important achievement given the high rates of delinquency on the reservation and among American Indians in Arizona generally. In 1998, the Youth Council was awarded a grant from the Close Up Foundation to develop a program that annually brings together hundreds of Native youth to explore citizens' rights in and responsibilities for tribal government. In 2001, the Youth Council's continuing advocacy for a teen court met with success when the Judicial Branch of the Gila River Indian Community received a grant from the US Department of Justice to establish a teen court aimed at reducing, controlling, and preventing crime among Gila River Indian youth.

Importantly, the Akimel O'odham/Pee-Posh Youth Council is producing and grooming leaders. A testament to the quality training they receive, Youth Council members have been elected to serve on numerous national boards and commissions including, among others, the National Congress of American Indians Youth Commission, the US Department of Transportation's National Organizations for Youth Safety, and the Millennium Young People's Congress. Members have testified before Committees in the US Senate and US House of Representatives, met with policymakers to lobby on issues of importance, and attended

White House functions. The fact that approximately 90 percent of former Youth Council members return to the Community to work and live after receiving their education is a powerful reminder of how important it is to involve youth in civic life. Former Youth Council members have assumed leadership positions with the Gila River Indian Community Tribal Council, Gila River Boys and Girls Clubs, Gila River Health Care Corporation, and Gila River Gaming Enterprises. In preparing youth for future roles as participants, leaders, and citizens of tribal government, the Youth Council has identified an effective way to bring about positive, permanent change within the Gila River Indian Community.

The accomplishments of the Akimel O’odham/Pee-Posh Youth Council have earned them widespread admiration and respect on and off-reservation. Three factors appear to be powerful indicators of the Youth Council’s success. The first is the Community’s recognition that youth can and should play a critical role in tribal governance. By encouraging and fostering youth participation in tribal government, the Youth Council has made use of a valuable and previously untapped resource. For many, the Youth Council provides compelling proof that youth can be articulate and persuasive spokespeople by informing tribal, state, and national leaders about issues affecting them, by providing guidance and feedback in policy formation, and finally, by encouraging community members to learn how they can hold elected leaders and governments accountable. The future of Indian nations to be self-governing depends upon knowledgeable, motivated, and skilled youth to assume leadership positions.

A second factor that bolsters the Youth Council’s effectiveness is the seriousness with which its members and the tribal government take the Youth Council’s responsibilities. In fact, the tribal government treats the Youth Council like any other tribal government program or department. Last year, for example, the Gila River Indian Community Tribal Council directed the Youth Council to justify its budget in great detail. While members of the Youth Council were frustrated that they had to spend so much time defending activities that they felt should be beyond question or reproach, they also knew that they were being held accountable as a legitimate governing institution. Similarly, members of the Youth Council take their roles and responsibilities as Community leaders seriously. Members commit to a code of ethics that strictly forbids substance use, gang participation, and inappropriate behavior (including inappropriate dress). Although violations are rare, members who break these standards are sanctioned swiftly and sternly by their peers. The code of ethics also is reinforced by a shared demand for excellence: by setting the bar high for their own participation, the Youth Council proves to its members and others that they can live exemplary lives. Adults in the Community have taken notice. The Akimel O’odham/Pee-Posh Youth Council’s code of ethics already is being replicated within the Gila River Indian Community tribal government.

A third factor that undergirds the Youth Council’s success is its commitment to investing in itself. These investments take many forms. For one, the Youth Council’s robust, well-documented, and periodically updated by-laws show that it pays attention to its own governance. Among these by-laws are staggered election terms (only a few positions come up for election each year), an organizational attribute that many tribal governments throughout Indian Country do not enjoy. Training in culturally appropriate forms of governance is another investment the Youth Council makes. While elements of this “cultural match” are obvious—the Youth Council president calls meetings to order with a gavel made of cactus, as did historical Akimel O’odham and Pee-Posh leaders—other elements run deeper. The Youth Council’s structure itself is significant: the Council’s representation by district reflects the fact that district allegiances are noticeably strong in the Community. These innovations are hallmarks of good governance.

The youthfulness of Native America is one of its most striking facts. The median age of the American Indian population is twenty-two and the youth population is growing faster than any other segment of Indian society. Investments in youth development are essential. Appropriately, tribal efforts towards youth development frequently focus on at-risk youth. Such efforts, however, should not eclipse the need for tribes to invest in youth who exhibit leadership potential. Indian nations cannot afford to lose the interest of their youth, especially if they are to be successful in sustaining self-determination. Although the Akimel O'odham/Pee-Posh Youth Council was formed, in large part, to offer youth a voice in addressing at-risk youth issues, the program is geared toward empowering and training future leaders. As tribes consider how to build the next generation of leaders, the Akimel O'odham/Pee-Posh Youth Council offers an excellent model of a youth development program that recognizes and facilitates the significant role youth may play in nation building.

Lessons:

- Statements about the importance of tribal youth should be backed by concrete investments in their development. For example, tribal leaders can facilitate the establishment of youth councils; fund, host, and participate in youth activities and events; and encourage youth to participate in national organizations. These and other investments inspire youth to make a positive difference in the community and build up the pool of future leaders.
- With appropriate training and organizational support, youth can make meaningful contributions to tribal governance. They can offer input into the issues affecting their peers, provide guidance and feedback in policy formation, and serve as effective spokespeople for the tribe.
- Like tribal governments, tribal youth councils require good organization. By-laws, staggered terms, a code of ethics, election rules, and clear processes for decision making are institutional ingredients for success.

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