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Project Falvmmichi Choctaw Nation Healthy Lifestyles/Youth Advisory Board Choctaw Nation

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“It is not cool to hit or be hit” is the straightforward motto of Project Falvmmichi, a school-based program of the Choctaw Nation designed to tackle the problem of domestic violence. The program teaches elementary school students positive ways to deal with anger and resolve conflicts. Today, more than 300 teen mentors work with second graders in over thirty public schools. Violent behavior harms the Choctaw Nation’s citizens, families, and future — but through Project Falvmmichi, the Nation is building intolerance for violent behavior from the ground up.

Violence in the Home

While there are a number of triggers for domestic violence, scholars note that historical trauma is an important underlying factor in many American Indian families. U.S. government policies that forced the removal of tribes from their homelands (the Choctaw Nation was one of many subjected to the “Trail of Tears”) and placed Indian children in boarding schools created ongoing emotional trauma and an unnatural breakdown in family relationships.

By the early 2000s, statistics suggested that domestic violence had become a part of life for many Choctaw Nation citizens. Within the Nation’s service area, which spans ten and a half counties in southeastern Oklahoma, Native Americans were the victims of domestic violence more than twice as often as Native Americans elsewhere in the state. The problem was devastating area families, and children were growing up with the belief that aggression was a normal way to resolve conflict.

It’s Not Cool to Hit

Fed up with the pervasive violence in her community, a 16-year old Choctaw citizen came to the Nation’s leadership with a simple idea: why not reach out to children to break the cycle of violence? The Nation agreed to fund her program, and in 2004 a new Choctaw Nation healthy lifestyle initiative, Project Falvmmichi, was born.

Project Falvmmichi teaches young children to express emotions in healthy ways. The program targets children in the second grade, before their behavior patterns become established. By teaching children to respect themselves and others, it addresses the root causes of domestic violence. One program administrator puts it this way: “What better place to begin this change than in the minds of the young?”

While adults with expertise in administration, counseling, social work, and education — drawn

from the ranks of tribal officials, school personnel, and citizen volunteers — help with program administration and curriculum design, Project Falvmmichi's core staff are its teen mentors. The mentors are recruited by the Choctaw Youth Advisory Board, a leadership and community service group for Choctaw Nation teens in grades eight through twelve. Each fall, over 300 teens are trained to work with school-aged children. Throughout the school year, these mentors make monthly visits to 2nd-grade classrooms at more than a third of the elementary schools in the Choctaw Nation service area. They perform puppet skits, hold discussions, and spend time in small groups doing crafts or other activities. Typically, after a performance in which the puppets get mad, the children get tips on how to deal with anger. The teens also talk about tough situations in the second graders' daily lives, like dealing with insults or bullies. Posters and photographs of the visits are displayed on classroom walls as a reminder of the lessons learned.

The teens form bonds with the young students and communicate with them in a way that is different from that of teachers or other adults. One mentor explains that the children enjoy the visits so much that "to see the look on their faces when we enter the room is priceless." Another notes, "I remember thinking in my first year of Project Falvmmichi that I really couldn't make a difference in these kids' lives...but I was so wrong."

Through Project Falvmmichi, more than 1,000 school children a year are taught new and healthy ways to express their emotions. Speaking to the success of the program, participating teachers have witnessed a correlated decrease in inappropriate classroom behavior such as hitting, biting, kicking, and hair-pulling. A teen mentor recalls an incident in which two young students were about to fight, but their peers reminded them, "It's not cool to hit," and they immediately stopped fighting. She comments, "When I heard of what had happened, it completely blew me away. The second graders were actually listening to what we say and using it in their daily lives."

Reclaiming Healthy Families

"Falvmmichi" is a Choctaw word meaning "to reclaim." Domestic violence threatens citizens' wellbeing and makes them less able to contribute to the life of the Nation. It also weakens the Nation's culture, since traditions are learned mainly within the home, and a family in crisis is less likely to pass on important values. By giving youth the tools they need to live healthy lives, Project Falvmmichi reclaims the Nation's citizens and families, sustains its dynamic culture, and strengthens the community.

Although the target population of Project Falvmmichi is second grade children, its reach is much broader. In particular, the teen mentors are sensitized to the issue of domestic violence, and thus are less likely themselves to become either perpetrators or victims of violence. One teen mentor called his adult sponsor after an incident with his girlfriend and requested help. Engagement with Project Falvmmichi helped him recognize his problem, made him aware of support systems within the tribe, and gave him the courage to change. He voluntarily left his mentorship role because he realized that he had to "walk the talk."

Being part of this initiative also inspires teens to become leaders in the community. They are aware that younger children look up to them as role models. One mentor explains, "You can't imagine how a group of second graders can really make you step up and become someone worth admiring." Another mentor used to think about leaving to explore the world, but Project Falvmmichi helped him realize that he can contribute closer to home. "We have a lot to do in our communities," he said.

A unique aspect of Project Falvmmichi is its universal outreach. While the program was

created and is fully funded by the Choctaw Nation, it operates in the state of Oklahoma's public schools, and all children in a classroom, Native and non-Native, participate in Project Falvmmichi's activities. In a first-rate example of its "good neighbor policy," the Choctaw Nation has chosen to use its administrative strength, leadership skills, and cultural insights to improve the safety of all families in its service area. As one tribal official put it, "Domestic violence is a tragedy in any home, and all children are worth the investment placed in them."

Bringing the Lessons Home

In Choctaw tradition, improving health is not just about providing immediate medical care but about taking steps to restore harmony within an individual, the family, and the community. Through Project Falvmmichi, the Choctaw Nation brings together tribal employees, public school officials, young children, teens, and concerned adults in a long-term effort to change the attitudes that allow domestic violence to take root. Second graders, guided by their teen mentors, gain self-esteem and learn to make better choices when confronted with conflict. As these children and teens grow up and form their own families, they will use Project Falvmmichi's teachings to create a new generation of healthy homes and healthy Choctaw Nation citizens.

Lessons in Nation Building:

- Teaching young children positive ways to express emotions fosters a safer community.
- By empowering high school students to be role models, a nation actively nurtures well-adjusted, contributing adults.
- Culturally appropriate domestic violence curricula can be effectively integrated into grade-school classrooms.

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