
NATIVE AMERICAN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE



INNOVATION**STORY**

NO. 4

STORY

VICTORIA

BLANCO

LOCATION

MINNEAPOLIS,

MN

The Native American Community Development Institute (NACDI) grew out of research that showed outcomes for American Indians in Hennepin County had not improved substantially in the past 40 years. NACDI spent three years asking Native people what they wanted for their future, as opposed to what they needed to meet their basic needs. The gatherings resulted in a rich and bold vision for a vibrant, resilient community that celebrates Native identity.





LEADER
ROBERT LILLIGREN

BUDGET
\$500,000–\$999,999

GEOGRAPHY
MINNESOTA,
NATIVE NATIONS

YEARS ACTIVE
FOUNDED IN 2007

NACDI PARTNERS WITH AMERICAN INDIAN COMMUNITIES TO BUILD AND EXECUTE 21ST-CENTURY COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES.

BREAKTHROUGH

Through an unprecedented level of community engagement, NACDI co-created a revolutionary visioning document called the American Indian Cultural Corridor Community Blueprint. The living record outlines a framework of action to revitalize the Native community based on the dreams, talents and assets of the American Indians who live in the area.

RECOGNIZING TALENT IN COMMUNITIES

To transform Franklin Avenue from an overlooked street into a bustling hub known as the American Indian Cultural Corridor, NACDI led with an assets-based approach that emphasized individual contact to win over skepticism and develop a vision for the area founded in Native input.

PROSPERITY BUILT THROUGH LISTENING

The success of NACDI’s work hinges on keeping the American Indian community involved. NACDI celebrates Indigenous identity and culture, and continually creates opportunities for residents to give feedback on what’s working and what needs improvement.

VALUES PROACTIVITY



EMPHASIZES LEARNING



VALUES INCLUSIVITY



**BUILDING A PROMISING
FUTURE FOR URBAN
AMERICAN INDIANS**

At Pow Wow Grounds on Franklin Avenue in

Minneapolis, you can always find hot coffee, wild rice soup and neighborhood residents sitting at the coffee shop's tables.

The owner, Robert Rice, greets a flow of customers throughout the day, many of whom are friends. He wears a cap that reads "Proud Native," and knows the ins and outs of this six block stretch of cityscape known as the American Indian Cultural Corridor. He's lived here most of his life and remembers when the neighborhood sat desolate, with only a handful of bars and houses rented by American Indians and few others. Today, Pow Wow Grounds is a natural stopover for art seekers headed to All My Relations Art Gallery, an exhibition space featuring work by Native artists, or to NACDI, a nonprofit serving American Indians living in Minneapolis.

While the area is a hotbed of activity today, it wasn't long ago that Native businesses along the American Indian Cultural Corridor struggled to stay afloat. A decade ago, most American Indians in the area lived at or below the poverty line despite the relative wealth in nearby Minneapolis neighborhoods. When Robert was a child living in the rundown neighborhood, economic despair created a sense among Indigenous people that their cultural traditions were worthless. Many parents stopped teaching their children Native recipes and languages, believing that the path to success lay in assimilation. As a new business owner, Robert didn't expect Pow Wow Grounds to become a neighborhood and city treasure that celebrates Native cuisine. He imagined he would serve a mostly Native clientele and earn just enough to pay rent. That changed in 2006 when NACDI got tired of seeing its community hopeless and beaten down. The organization rallied American Indians living along the corridor to pen a community blueprint, a living document that holds the community's dreams and future plans for the neighborhood.



NACDI encouraged American Indians living in Minneapolis to attend evening meetings where the previous president of the organization, Jay Bad Heart Bull, facilitated discussions about what American Indians needed. At first, community members didn't know how to respond; they weren't accustomed to being asked what they hoped for or wanted. "We had to start with fundamental education on what visioning was," says Robert Lilligren, a previous NACDI board member who currently serves as the organization's president. Before joining NACDI, Robert served as the first American Indian Minneapolis City Council member. Developing the Global Market at the Midtown Exchange in Minneapolis taught him that revitalizing old neighborhoods creates new opportunities for entrepreneurs and public spaces for citizens to enjoy. "We had to give people permission to dream about what they wanted their community to look like," he says. Through early conversations with residents, NACDI found that many felt skeptical about the community blueprint's ability to deliver tangible improvements in their lives. Community members' ambivalence, coupled with the youth's general disconnect from their ancestral culture, presented a unique hurdle for NACDI to surmount when generating support for the community blueprint. To inspire residents' interest and participation, NACDI personally approached individuals to ask about the aspirations they had for themselves, as well as for the community. Through face-to-face conversations, NACDI gained the support of dozens of unlikely members. The organization saw itself as the "keeper of the vision," so it was crucial that the vast majority of American Indian community members showed up and spoke. Over the course of three years, community members articulated their hopes into a single, comprehensive community blueprint.

The American Indian Cultural Corridor is now a physical manifestation of the blueprint that the community drafted. On Franklin Avenue, American Indians can concentrate their businesses, schools, arts and houses. The corridor allows Native residents to live and work in close proximity to one another, which in turn promotes community building and encourages elders to pass on American Indian traditions, including recipes, language and art. Thanks to NACDI's revitalization efforts, urban American Indians are building a tangible presence in Minneapolis, ensuring their cultural survival.



VALUES PROACTIVITY

To design its organizational model, NACDI relied on data and best practices from around the world. The team collected 20 years of information and research from other organizations before drawing up its internal structure. While NACDI often lets the community lead, it also depends on its own expertise to urge the community to stretch in transformational ways.

Locally and nationally, the corridor is a destination for people who want to learn more about the contemporary lives of American Indians through, art, food and history. It's an economic model that simultaneously preserves and celebrates indigenous culture, while reinforcing the economic stability of American Indians.

RECOGNIZING TALENT IN COMMUNITIES

NACDI's efforts follow an asset-based approach to

community development. Instead of bringing in outsiders to fix problems, NACDI believes American Indian community members possess the talent to effect change in their lives and transform the neighborhood.

This is why NACDI prioritized inviting American Indians to create and implement the community blueprint. For years, other nonprofits attempted to identify and fix problems, but their deficit approach hearkened to the old mentality that American Indians needed to be saved. "My grandparents had their language, Apache, beaten out of them," says Cole St. Arnold, the operations and projects manager of NACDI. Historically, white Americans sought to "fix" American Indians by assimilating them into white culture by doing things like punishing children who spoke their ancestral languages in school. NACDI understands this oppressive history fomented the despair that launched so many American Indians into poverty. But instead of focusing solely on problems, NACDI uses affirming words like "grow" and "prosper" to encourage the Native community to value their culture enough to preserve it and strengthen it.



“This land, this real estate, is a huge asset. That’s what makes the whole idea of a cultural corridor feasible, the fact that we have control over this dirt,” says Robert Lilligren. The organization cherishes the idea of using Minneapolis land to shape American Indians’ future, in part because it’s a way to remedy a failed government promise. In 1956, the Indian Relocation Act promised job training and opportunities to American Indians who left their reservations and moved to cities across the country. Over 75,000 Native people left their reservations, hoping to break free from joblessness and poverty. Once they reached new cities, though, they encountered discrimination that prevented them from attaining jobs. “There was no life support here,” Cole says of Minneapolis. Over six decades, American Indians formed a community along Franklin Avenue. Through the process of writing a community blueprint, NACDI showed American Indian community members that their individual and cultural prosperity was intertwined with the revitalization of the corridor.

Many non-Native business owners along the corridor initially opposed NACDI’s efforts to transform the neighborhood. Over the years, as Franklin Avenue evolved into a multicultural neighborhood, Somali and Latino community members have also sought to promote their own burgeoning businesses and arts. NACDI has dealt delicately with the task of building an American Indian neighborhood that welcomes and incorporates non-Native community members. As they began writing the community blueprint, NACDI team members met with non-Native community members one on one to share their story and vision for a prosperous American Indian community. Once complete, NACDI recruited 12 emerging community leaders to walk door to door to obtain Native community members’ signatures of endorsement. One thousand signatures later and NACDI felt like it had enough community support to begin putting elements of the blueprint into action. In 2010, NACDI officially introduced the American Indian Cultural Corridor.



EMPHASIZES LEARNING

NACDI is an emerging national model for sustainable culturally specific development that could be replicated in other urban cities. The organization’s community blueprint represents a new level of aggregation, articulation and endorsement not previously explored with Native communities. NACDI continually shares the visioning document with larger nonprofit and philanthropic organizations, Indigenous communities and other communities of color to describe how NACDI was able to transform a community using an asset-based, cultural approach. “We are confident we have laid the groundwork from which others can successfully build upon and innovate in their respective communities,” says Robert Lilligren.



PROSPERITY BUILT THROUGH LISTENING

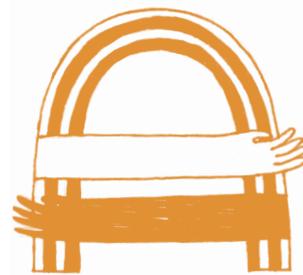
Every Friday, Native farmers and food trucks convert the

NACDI parking lot into a farmers market. Here, American Indian community members can find traditional ingredients like wild rice, as well as a variety of fruits and vegetables. The All My Relations Art Gallery opens daily and showcases Native artists' paintings and sculptures.

Colorful banners with indigenous words line the corridor, teaching children words from their ancestral languages. Entrepreneurship training for youth and emerging business leaders ensures the corridor will continue to host Native-owned businesses of future generations.

NACDI also recently launched the Organizing and Leadership Institute, the only community organizing training led by and for American Indians. NACDI reports that community members feel a swelling sense of pride in their community and culture. Over the next year, NACDI plans to listen to community members and collect data to learn which elements of the blueprint are most effective and which can be improved. NACDI will host breakfasts and open houses where they will ask for input, and staff members will chat with community members around the neighborhood to hear what they have to say. NACDI strives to be “owned” by the community it serves, and it knows that involving residents is the key to creating a shared, prosperous future.

Today, NACDI is one of more than 30 American Indian organizations located along the American Indian Cultural Corridor, which boasts the largest concentration of urban Native businesses in the country. “The corridor is one of a kind,” says Cole, because it gives American Indians a space to experience their Native culture. Growing up, Cole returned to the reservation periodically to connect with his Apache heritage. “That’s why so many of us go back, because that’s the only way we’re going to get it,” Cole explains. NACDI envisions the corridor as a nexus for Indigenous culture, where American Indians across tribes gather to celebrate their identity. “We’re trying to return to this foundation of culture. We need it,” says Robert Lilligren, who doesn’t take the gift of space for granted. “We are the survivors of cultural genocide. We’re moving from a sense of lacking to a sense of plenty.”



VALUES INCLUSIVITY

NACDI relishes in finding diverse staff with completely divergent skill sets to fill its job openings. In making hiring decisions, it asks: “Who is most different than us?” That question has led the NACDI team to welcome employees from business, community organizing, real estate, art and museum curation.

Image: All My Relations
Gallery Exterior

“OUR TEAM DREAMS BIG AND DOESN’T LET HURDLES GET IN THE WAY, BUT RATHER BRAINSTORMS WAYS TO OVERCOME THOSE CHALLENGES AND CREATE UPSTREAM SOLUTIONS. COMMUNAL IDEATION IS THE SOIL IN WHICH WE ARE ROOTED, AND IT’S OUR RESPONSIBILITY TO WATER AND NURTURE OUR SEEDS OF CHANGE.”

— NACDI STAKEHOLDER





Images: Corridor Neighborhood, NACDI Stakeholder