

# THUNDER VALLEY COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

## A Place of Hope

Thunder Valley Community Development Corporation (TVCDC) believes that the solutions to the issues facing Pine Ridge Reservation can be found from within — and that the solutions must be as big as the historical challenges they face. These principles fuel a comprehensive grassroots effort to improve the lives of the 30,000 Oglala Lakota who make Pine Ridge their home.

“You have to trust  
that the community  
possesses the solutions.”

**Jennifer Irving**

Thunder Valley Community Development Corporation

# INNOVATION

## THUNDER VALLEY COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

TVCDC is transforming the Pine Ridge Reservation by building an ecosystem of opportunity to address complex problems. The organization pairs solid administrative systems with a community-building approach that honors Lakota tradition.

### BREAKTHROUGH

TVCDC takes care to assess each new program idea and get community feedback early and often, ensuring that its initiatives align with its sustainability and community wealth-building goals. Program leaders continually bring the community together to test new ideas and maximize results.

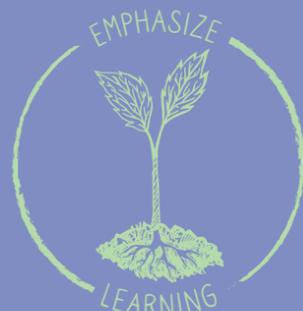
## A MEETING MADE FOR THE PEOPLE

TVCDC embraces the unique aspects of Lakota culture in its programming, in ways that outside organizations historically have not. This commitment to culture has led to a stronger bond between the organization and the community, a bond that has brought new voices to major community decisions.

## COMMUNITY GENIUS

TVCDC leads with a simple question: “What do the people want?” Its work flows from the answers the organization hears from the community — both in identifying issues and in developing solutions. To make sure those solutions are effective, TVCDC builds cooperative groups with a mix of community experts and holders of other levers of power.

### CHARACTERISTICS OF INNOVATION



As the fire burned down outside of the Inipi, or sweat lodge, about two dozen people gathered to watch the smoldering embers finish heating the rocks for the sweat that evening.

As the group waited to enter the canvas-covered structure, the conversation drifted toward the land where they stood — Pine Ridge Reservation. People started rattling off the things they saw and didn't like: systemic poverty, a shortage of housing, alarmingly high rates of infant mortality and more than 80 percent of the reservation's 30,000 members unemployed. Why didn't the government, the Tribe or the college fix these challenges? The question hung in the air as the fire went out and the nearly 25 people filed into the sweat lodge, where they would stay for the next two hours.

“The ancestors came in there,” says Nick Tilsen, a citizen of the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation — home of the Oglala Lakota Sioux Tribe — who was in the Inipi that night. “They really chewed us out and said, ‘How long are you going to let other people decide the future for your children? Are you not warriors? It's time to stop talking and start doing. Don't come from a place of fear; come from a place of hope.’”

# “Don't come from a place of fear; come from a place of hope.”

**The Ancestors**

Thunder Valley Community Development Corporation

CHARACTERISTIC **No 1**



On federal Indian lands, the complicated legal and political relationship between organizations such as TVCDC and state and tribal governments can sometimes stop progress in its tracks. Though TVCDC operates within a tribal jurisdiction, it isn't an official tribal organization. This creates potential challenges in two directions: tribal leaders may not feel as engaged because they lack formal influence over the direction of the work at TVCDC; and state and federal partners often want to work directly with the Tribe, as opposed to through TVCDC programs. Aware of how these conflicts could be detrimental to its efforts, TVCDC has actively invited representatives of local governments into its building to use its meeting rooms, technology and space. This effort has allowed politicians to see the work that the organization is doing and has helped to build powerful relationships with influencers. That includes those in local leadership and other tribal partners. Says Jennifer Irving, TVCDC's deputy director, "When they have taken the time to visit and to learn about the work at TVCDC, many have become both participants and supporters of the work."

Prior to the ceremony, Nick and a group of other people from the reservation debated whether starting a new organization might help address the harsh realities of life on their South Dakota homelands.

At the same time, several young people and their families on the reservation were returning to Lakota spirituality as a way to confront and challenge those same difficulties. The Sundance, a ceremony known for being a grueling spiritual and physical test in which participants fast and dance for days, became a place where youth began to dream of a new future.

"We realized in our Lakota ceremonial way of life, we were willing to sacrifice all kinds of things and put sweat equity and work into something," says Nick. "When it came to everyday life in society — having a job, having a life, having a home, having

mobility — we were stuck in a poverty mentality. We were still waiting for this handout, and we said, 'That's not us.'"

In the Inipi ceremony that night, Nick got a clear message from his ancestors: It was time for action. Now was the time to start Thunder Valley Community Development Corporation (TVCDC). That moment of clarity replaced his fear with encouragement. How people showed up in their daily lives on the reservation didn't match the strength and resilience Nick saw them bring to ceremonies. His time in the sweat lodge taught him that to bridge the disconnect, TVCDC had to be rooted in spirituality. It had to be rooted in culture. It had to be rooted in the people. Lakota identity became the rallying cry around which TVCDC assembled. The people living on Pine Ridge were powerful; they were beautiful; and they were just what the community needed to finally make the real change the people wanted to see.

**"We recognized early on we were going to have to do an inverted pyramid around innovation."**

**Nick Tilsen**

Thunder Valley Community Development Corporation



"Pine Ridge exists in the position it has been in because people on the outside of this community impose things on it — sometimes even solutions, and sometimes really good-hearted people. But when it comes from the outside, it has clearly perpetuated the system of poverty and perpetuated the problem," says Nick, the founding executive director of TVCDC. "We recognized early on we were going to have to do an inverted pyramid around innovation. We had to organize our community and create solutions from the ground up. Then, we were going to have to challenge philanthropy, investments and agencies to meet us where our vision lies, not where their visions lie."

# A MEETING MADE FOR THE PEOPLE



For generations, Lakota people have been directed by outside forces to abandon their traditional ways in exchange for Western institutions.

TVCDC was aware of the history of failed institutions across Indian country that had tried to detach the people from their ancient teachings and beliefs. So the young organization did the opposite of what outsiders had tried in the past. Instead of shying away from the unique aspects of Lakota culture that make its geography and community different from others, TVCDC embraced this legacy by using core principles of its people's heritage to guide it. This commitment to the core philosophies of its constituents has helped the organization earn the support of Lakota citizens.

"There has not been one building or one decision we ever made throughout the whole organization that was made by just the board," says Nick. "We always involved the people."

Early on, however, community members met outreach efforts with apprehension and trepidation. The organization's initial efforts to earn community trust and secure participation required TVCDC to spend much of its time convincing those in attendance that the work of TVCDC would embrace the people, unlike any other bureaucracy before it.

"Community engagement is about shifting power because people feel like they are left powerless. Part of it is shifting their mindset," says Nick. TVCDC's willingness to reach out to those who have been left out of previous decision-making processes has instilled a new pride in community members that is evident at each community meeting it holds.

One early town-hall-style meeting stands out as the moment when the organization first realized its outreach was working. At the end of that community gathering, Nick found himself discouraged. He believed that the meeting had gone horribly and that the community was sure to reject the young organization.

## CHARACTERISTIC No 2



The conversation about scaling is a common one in philanthropy. Tatewin Means, the executive director of TVCDC, often hears the same question: How do we replicate TVCDC's model in other communities? "That can be frustrating, especially for organizations that are place-based, because it's specific to the needs of our communities," says Tatewin. "It's important for those in philanthropy to understand the work we're doing in our communities is worthy of investment just because we're able to make that local impact in and of itself. The values of the work shouldn't depend on its scalability because our communities are so different. As Indigenous communities, it's our job to push back on that because we don't want Pan-Indigenism or Pan-Indianism." In other words, what's right for Pine Ridge might not be right for a reservation or tribal community in Arizona or Minnesota. There isn't a one-size-fits-all answer. Instead of replication, Tatewin offers a different strategy: "Trust in local communities to know what's best for them, and then invest in that."



“This is the first time anybody ever asked me what I wanted for my future.”

**Community Elder**  
Oglala Lakota Nation

He watched as the crowd exited the building. As he stood there, an elderly woman approached him. She was visibly shaken up and said to Nick, “This is the best meeting I have ever been to. I’m 91, born and raised on this reservation, and this is the first time anybody ever asked me what I wanted for my future. Nobody ever asked me what I wanted for my kids or grandkids.”

While confirmation that TVCDC’s community outreach was working came during that meeting, Nick admits the appeal of community meetings fades quickly. To maintain the attention of the public, TVCDC had to come up with new

ways to bring the community into its processes. It decided to incorporate the talents different groups, such as artists, brought to the table. The organization launched “Design Preps,” which gave architects and artists a chance to translate community input into 3D models. For example, it invited the public to a meeting to brainstorm ideas for the design of a new building. After collecting the feedback, TVCDC gave it to an artist, who built a model out of cardboard. At the next meeting, community members could see firsthand how their participation in the previous meeting had led to the creation of a tangible model they could see and touch.



SUPPORTING THE ARTS



COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

# COMMUNITY GENIUS

When Thunder Valley first started, it didn’t have a five-year plan.

It didn’t have a grand vision for the legacy it wanted to leave behind. “We just always tried to say, ‘What do the people want?’ And we let that lead,” says Jennifer Irving, TVCDC’s deputy director. The people on Pine Ridge asked for housing, a school, youth programming, economic development and better access to healthy food. As the list continued to grow, people’s dreams for Pine Ridge grew bigger. TVCDC started developing huge initiatives to improve life on the reservation. “We understood we couldn’t operate in a silo,” says Jennifer. The community wanted to radically change systems around housing, education and economic development, and to do that, TVCDC started reaching out to partners beyond its walls.

“You have to trust that the community possesses the solutions,” says Jennifer. “Sometimes, particularly in rural or Indigenous communities, we’re prescribed the idea that the solution is ‘out there.’ It’s over there. It’s in the big cities. We forget that it could be right in front of us as well.”

To harness the genius of the community, TVCDC organized nearly a dozen working groups that align with the main areas of its work. The collaboratives are a mix of community experts, federal staffers, partners with the same area of focus and tribal leaders who can push legislation forward. “Our partners are on the front lines providing services to the people. We get to help them step out of that day-to-day stuff and dream big,” says Jennifer. “I see TVCDC as a connector more than anything.”

Yet the idea of working together didn’t take hold right away. “Folks just weren’t used to working in a collaborative way,” says Jennifer. “They were used to going to their job and doing that job. People had gotten used to working in their silos.” Jennifer found people were hesitant to join TVCDC’s coalitions because they couldn’t immediately understand what was in it for them. At the time, partners often thought of success as getting more money for their work. When that didn’t materialize, some partners struggled to see there could be other benefits to working collectively. To keep those people involved, and get more people on board, TVCDC had to retrain community members to see success as more than just funding. Sometimes success looked like a federal



partner offering to fly a facilitator out to Pine Ridge, free of charge, to help a coalition create a new strategic plan. Other times it looked like a government partner agreeing to run a free workshop on economic development that usually cost upward of \$25,000. The door to those resources opened when national partners saw organized coalitions on Pine Ridge actively working together to identify priorities and challenge systems.

Yet for Jennifer, one of the biggest successes of all was seeing her community members gather in one space to share the work they were doing and prioritize what they wanted to do next. “There were so many times where people were like, ‘I didn’t realize there was so much going on. I didn’t realize there

was so much available locally,” says Jennifer, noting this was especially true when it came to youth programming.

She often heard people talk about how there weren’t enough programs for youth, but when someone put out a call on social media asking what young people could do over the summer, the post got nearly 200 responses in just 30 minutes. “The narrative shifted in that room,” says Jennifer. “Success isn’t just about the tangible product, but it’s about shifting what we think the problem is and what we think is available.” As that happened more and more, TVCDC began to rewrite Pine Ridge’s story — from one plagued by challenges to one of hope.

“It’s about shifting what we think the problem is and what we think is available.”

**Jennifer Irving**  
Thunder Valley Community Development Corporation

CHARACTERISTIC No 3



When TVCDC vowed to let the community lead its work, the organization had no idea what direction that might take. The approach required a certain amount of humility among TVCDC staffers and a willingness to let go of the notion that TVCDC should immediately have all the answers. “The culture of the organization is that we are always going to be students,” says Nick. “No matter how much recognition we get or how many people say we’re an expert, we are never afraid to admit what we do not know.” That meant when people on Pine Ridge asked TVCDC to build houses — work the organization had never done before — staff had to start by asking the basics, such as, “How do we do this?” or “What’s our first step?” For Jennifer, it always comes back to the same core belief: “You have to understand your community, and by understanding your community you can’t know it all,” she says. “You’re only one perspective.”





TVCDC TEAM



CHILD IN THE COMMUNITY



LOCAL FARMING



TVCDC STREET SIGNS



TIP! CIRCLE HOMES



BUILDING A HOME



CHILD IN THE COMMUNITY



CONSTRUCTION WORKER