

Native Voices: Connecting cultures in FFA

By Kelsey Kennedy

For Josh Moore, it all started his senior year of high school with an essay contest sponsored by the [Intertribal Agriculture Council](#), an organization that promotes the conservation, development and use of agricultural resources for Native Americans. Soon, Moore was elected state vice president of the Arizona FFA association and was traveling all over the country to spread his message: Native Americans and their contributions to agriculture are important and these students need something like FFA in their lives.

Eventually he was working with Erica Flores, coordinator for Diversity and Inclusion for the National FFA Organization, to help plan the Native American Heritage Celebration at the 84th National FFA Convention. The celebration featured displays of Native American culture on the national convention's main stage. Also included was a round table discussion for FFA members, advisors and staff and members of the Native American community, including Janie Simms Hipp, senior tribal advisor to the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture and the director of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Office of Tribal Relations. The goal was to give FFA members a taste of Native American culture and educate them about diversity within FFA. Moore described the challenge best: "The biggest barrier between Native Americans and the rest of FFA is misconception."

Celebrating cultures

Dazzling colors, swirling flutes and Native American dance took over the national convention stage after the last opening session on Wednesday night. The award-winning Native American musical group Brulé performed while dressed in traditional regalia. For Paul LaRouche, a member of the Lower Brule Sioux tribe and the founder of Brulé, their performance at national convention was "combination outreach, combination education and part rock concert." While the performance was entertaining for the audience, it was not without purpose. "It is our hope that they'll walk away with a new perception of Native America," LaRouche said. "There are so many misconceptions about the culture, even to this day."

LaRouche and Brulé have performed the world over, bringing their culture and a message of peace to audiences. While national convention may not be the Peace Palace in the Netherlands, where Brulé performed in 2000, the group sees the visit as an opportunity to help create change for Native Americans involved in agriculture.

LaRouche said, "We couldn't be more thrilled, and there couldn't be a better place to work on an ambassadorship between Native America and mainstream

America.” He also hoped it would be a call to action. “I believe that there is something long and lasting that Native America has yet to contribute to FFA and what we would call the agriculture industry.”

Wednesday night’s performance was followed by a blanket presentation the next day. During Thursday’s second general session, Chief Earl Old Person of the Blackfeet Nation, and a former FFA member, presented ceremonial woolen Pendleton blankets to the National FFA Officers and National FFA Advisor, Dr. Steve Brown. Each blanket featured special designs representing tribes from across the country and was a gesture of respect and unity. Dr. Brown’s blanket will soon be on display at the National FFA Center.

For Chief Old Person, being surrounded by blue jackets was nothing new. He was a member of the Browning, Mont., FFA Chapter in the 1940s and credits FFA with giving him skills to help him in his daily life. “Being a part of the FFA chapter gave me an experience of leadership,” he said. While he learned leadership, he also had the opportunity to meet FFA members from all over the country, and he even played in the Montana FFA band. “They were rewarding because there was a lot I learned from those activities,” he said. Chief Old Person, who speaks fluent Blackfeet, helped interpret for tribal elders into the 1950s. In 1954 he joined the tribal council and was declared a lifetime chief in 1978.

Changing conversations

Thursday morning, a meeting room at the Indiana Convention Center was full of FFA members, staff and members of the Native American community. They had traveled from all over the country to discuss the future of Native American students in FFA and how to help other FFA members learn more about their culture. While Flores and Moore expected around 30 people to come, more than 100 people made their way to the round table over the course of the morning. The discussion was engaging for everyone, but the event had an especially large impact on the students. “These kids, they realized what they’re a part of,” Moore said. “It brought that sense of belonging that a lot of these kids crave.” Hipp agreed. “There are just so many students who are hungry for an FFA or a 4-H.”

Coming to the round table was an easy choice for Hipp. “I was immediately on board,” she said. For her, getting Native American FFA members is of the utmost importance and is key to the long-term success of students and FFA. She said, “We’ve got to get the next set of ag educators to reach out to Native students. It has to be embraced as a part of the FFA curriculum and delivery model.”

Montana chapters have been integrating Native American education into their state activities for the last six years with the FFA/American Indian Program. The project was started in 2006 by Bill Jimmerson, Montana’s state FFA advisor, as

an educational program to help students share their culture. Each year, chapters from across the state prepare PowerPoint presentations and dances highlighting different traditions. The winning chapter would often present at national convention, but now they are working with the diversity program at the national level. The changes in Montana have been noticeable. "After three years of this program, kids were interspersed among all of the kids because they felt like they were a part of the group. To me, that's the best part," Jimmerson said. While the FFA/American Indian Program is creating momentum in Montana, it is just one small step forward. Jimmerson said, "We still have a long way to go, even in Montana."

Flores hopes to bring Montana's spirit to the national level. With 210 chapters across the country serving students who identify as Native American, bringing together chapters that feel isolated have helped people to connect and "be with those they identify with," said Flores. "From the start, it was about engaging those that typically aren't." Flores and her team put together a video and other material to be used by chapters and advocates for education both on the local and national level. The materials can even be used for states to have their own heritage celebrations. The events at national convention were just the beginning. Flores said, "The whole process has been transformational, and I know the real transformation hasn't even begun."

<https://www.ffa.org/Events/conventionandexpo/highlights/2011/news/Pages/Native-Voices.aspx>