

# Traditional tobacco use connects Native youth to culture, community, and health

## Tobacco-Free Communities Grant Program

5/8/2019

The traditional tobacco used by Native Americans in Minnesota is much different from what commercial tobacco manufacturers sell—both in how the tobacco is grown and harvested, and how it is used.

Tribal methods and ingredients differ, but Native tobacco, called “cansasa” or “asemaa” by area tribes, is carefully hand-prepared and offered respectfully for prayer, healing, and ceremony.



*“I’ve watched these kids grow. We know what we do works.”*  
Travis DeCory, Ninijanisag Program Coordinator.

“We don’t just go to the store to buy commercial tobacco,” said Travis DeCory, Program Coordinator of the Ninijanisag program at Ain Dah Yung Center in St. Paul. “We go out and make our own tobacco. The process is long and slow and it takes a lot of work.”

“There’s no nicotine in cansasa, [and we may burn it] but we don’t actually smoke it,” said Tobacco Prevention Advocate Dennis Gilbert. “Because when you inhale the smoke, you inhale your prayer, so the prayer won’t be heard.”

DeCory and Gilbert work with Native youth in the Ninijanisag program to teach traditional tobacco practices as part of a successful strategy to prevent children from using commercial tobacco. The young people learn to make a traditional Dakota and Lakota tobacco blend called “kinnickinnick” by harvesting cansasa from the inner bark of the red willow tree in late winter, and blending it with mint leaves and berries. The

Anishinabe—the Ojibwe people—use red willow bark as their preferred tobacco (“asemaa”) as well.

Ninijanisag, which means “our children” in Ojibwe, is a program that grounds young people ages 8–17 years old in Native culture while keeping them away from alcohol and substance abuse, teen dating violence, gang involvement, and potentially homelessness. Ain Dah Yung (“our home”) Center is supported in their efforts as one of eleven recipients of a Tobacco-Free Communities (TFC) grant



*Tobacco Prevention Advocate Dennis Gilbert teaches young people to carefully harvest red willow tree bark and other plants used to make kinnickinnick—a traditional Dakota and Lakota plant blend—which contains no nicotine.*

from the Minnesota Department of Health. TFC is a program to reduce smoking, prevent youth commercial tobacco use, and address tobacco-related disparities in Minnesota. The TFC grant program is part of a growing movement to promote community-driven tobacco prevention and control activities and strategies.

### Cultural awareness includes understanding historical trauma

Minnesota Native Americans have a long history with traditional tobacco as medicine. However, from 1877 to 1978, sacred tobacco use by American Indians was prohibited by federal law, as were many other Native religious practices. During this time, Native Americans were restricted to more highly addictive and harmful forms of commercial tobacco;



Through the Ninijanisag Program, Ain Dah Yung Center works with American Indian youth between the ages of 8-21 in the Twin Cities metro area, to reduce non-traditional tobacco use in American Indian youth and young adults.



The Tobacco-Free Communities Grant Program is a program of the Minnesota Department of Health that aims to reduce youth tobacco use and address tobacco-related disparities in Minnesota by promoting community-driven tobacco prevention and control activities and strategies.

## TRADITIONAL TOBACCO USE CONNECTS NATIVE YOUTH TO CULTURE, COMMUNITY, AND HEALTH

addiction to commercial tobacco, such as smoking cigarettes, became more widespread among Native people. In Minnesota, 59 percent of American Indian adults smoke (TTUP, 2013), compared to 14.5 percent of Minnesota’s overall population (BRFSS, 2017).

Returning to the sacred use of traditional tobacco and restoring American Indian cultural practices measurably reduces the number of American Indian youth who begin using commercial tobacco. According to findings from the Wisconsin American Indian Youth Tobacco Survey (2008-2009), the use of traditional tobacco in ceremonies is a protective factor against tobacco abuse. Youth who use traditional tobacco in ceremony were less likely to have ever smoked commercial tobacco or to have smoked commercial tobacco in the last 30 days than those who had not.

### Young people value cultural connections, wise guidance, and support of friends

Young people participating in the Ninijanisag program come together for regular meetings and activities, such as talking circles, drum and dance, sweat lodge, crafting, and learning Native language. They also have leadership opportunities, organize community cultural events, and engage with other Native American organizations in the Twin Cities as part of their larger community.



*Student Nolan Berglund says learn about traditions “connects us to who we are, to our ancestors.”*

A recent Ain Dah Yung community survey confirmed that young people are drawn to the program in part because of the community connections and support systems that flourish here. It’s a theme the Ninijanisag youth echo.

“I think this group really helps guide us on the right track to become who we are,

and to become the great people our community needs,” said Nolan Berglund. He attends Harding High School and is part of the Ninijanisag program. “It’s important to learn about our traditions because it connects us to who we are, to our ancestors. This is a place where we can get new friends, help build our community, have a place where we can feel safe, and have somebody wise to guide us through our teenage years.”

“Native culture is kind of everything to me,” said Gabriel Clark, a recent graduate from Washington Technology Magnet School. “When you use tobacco the right way, it’s supposed to help you send your voice up to your ancestors. It’s used for a very beautiful purpose. It could be used to help save somebody’s life versus how [commercial tobacco] ends somebody’s life a lot quicker.”



*“When you use tobacco the right way, it’s for a very beautiful purpose,” said recent graduate Gabriel Clark.*



*Ninijanisag participant Miskwa Gimiwun Chapman values the mutual respect that is reflected in traditional tobacco use.*

Miskwa Gimiwun Chapman, a student at Harding, carries her sacred tobacco with her. “It’s like a mutual respect for all our beings—you give back before you take,” says Chapman. When she goes to harvest in the garden, or goes hunting, she offers the tobacco in thanks. “For that animal giving their spirit to you, for that plant giving the

gift of food, for their gift of life and nutrition, you offer your tobacco. I want to promote traditional tobacco because it keeps me in balance with the animals and the plants and the beings that are around us.”

DeCory says the Ninjanisag program is growing. “A couple of years ago we really started doing more spiritual things with these kids,” he recalled. “We were at one of our ceremonies, and one kid looked over at me and said I’ve never been so proud to be an Indian in my life, and at that moment I knew we had to change things.”

Since then DeCory has focused the program more on community—the traditions, the ceremonies, and the history. “I’ve been here 19 years now, and I’ve been able to watch these kids grow over time. When I look at a kid I worked with when he was nine years old and now they’re 20 something, and have kids, and they’re living this life, we know that what we do works.”

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*Learn more about Ain Dah Yung Center at [adycenter.org](http://adycenter.org).*

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