

Rotary, Serving, with Trust, American Indians

We live on their land.

Originally they welcomed and nurtured us.

We borrowed from their knowledge-agriculture, government, medicinal remedies, and so much more. With their knowledge of the land and great skill as guides, they helped us tame the land and even track resistant Indian tribes.

We brought them diseases, liquor, trinkets.

We drove them out. Destroyed their way of life.

We wrote treaties with them, more than 370, almost all were broken.

We forced them onto reservations

We suppressed their religious faith

We have made attempts to assimilate them into our culture, removing their children to schools, relocating them from reservations to cities, forcing religious beliefs on them..

We lost their trust, they lost their identity.

In 1961, writing in the preface to the outstanding book "The American Heritage Book of Indians" written by William Brandon, President John Kennedy said:

"Before we can set out on the road to success, we have to know where we are going, and before we can know that we must determine where we have been in the past. It seems a basic requirement to study the history of our Indian people. America has much to learn about the heritage of our American Indians. Only through this study can we as a nation do what must be done if our treatment of the American Indian is not to be marked down for all time as a national disgrace."

We gave them their citizenship, the right to vote, and free travel in 1924. The Indian Civil Rights Act was passed in 1968-also called the Indian Bill of Rights, similar to the Bill of Rights in the U.S. Constitution. The American Indian Religious Freedom Act, was passed in 1978. We have built the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian in Washington which reflects the greatness of these peoples and appropriately contains exhibits demonstrating the subjection and mistreatment of them in our nation's history.

Since Rotary has developed and existed as one of the world's eminent service organizations and has literally improved the lives (including saving lives) of hundreds of millions of people, over its one hundred plus year history, it was appropriate, in 2010, to get Rotary involved, here in District 5450, through the formation of the American Indian Committee. To our knowledge we are the only Rotary District in the United States to have such a committee.

In our District there are Indian people who live below the poverty line, are unemployed, who suffer from disease, live in poor housing, or have broken families. Fifty two percent of Indian youth do not graduate from high school. Since 2010 the Committee has worked primarily with the Denver Indian Center (DIC) which exists to serve the approximate 40,000 Indians that live in the greater Denver area, that provides a place for cultural learning and gatherings; for the distribution of food; for learning about, and applying for available jobs; for the care of Indian Children; for the honored Indian Elders to meet; for improving Indian health, and more.

Since 2010, the Committee, made up of representatives from many clubs, has worked diligently with the Indian leaders at the DIC building their trust in us through communication, discussion, and agreement about how we can help. These discussions have led to our actions including assisting with the DIC Food Bank by collecting and delivering food; buying food for Thanksgiving and Christmas baskets; buying, wrapping and handing out gifts to Indian children at Christmas as well as providing Rotarian Mr. and Mrs Santa Claus; rebuilding the DIC playground; making and buying materials to start a pre-school at the DIC; bringing to the Indian Community, and volunteering at, their own 9Health Fair located at the DIC, and much more. Our American Indian Committee has also studied the potential for beginning a Rotary Club, with American Indian members, in the Denver area and beginning one on a reservation in Colorado, and beginning a mentor program for Indian youth with trained mentors from Rotary Clubs. Currently, we are studying the potential for a Global Grant to build small houses on the Pine Ridge Reservation where there is an acute housing shortage. (Yes the Foundation has a pilot project devoted to the construction of small houses.) Our committee has, annually, for five years, provided Rotary volunteers to keep score at the All West Native American Basketball Tournament at the Crown Center in Lakewood which was begun to encourage basketball on reservations with the aim, in part, of helping to prevent suicide among youth.

Is your Rotary club interested in working to improve the lives of American Indians? Would your club like to work with the District 5450 American Indian Committee as we serve the Indian community? Would you like to have a club presentation from the Co-Director of DIC?

Please write to the American Indian Committee Chairperson Jim McGibney, jimmcgibney@me.com or Mike Oldham, meoldham@msn.com. Thank you.