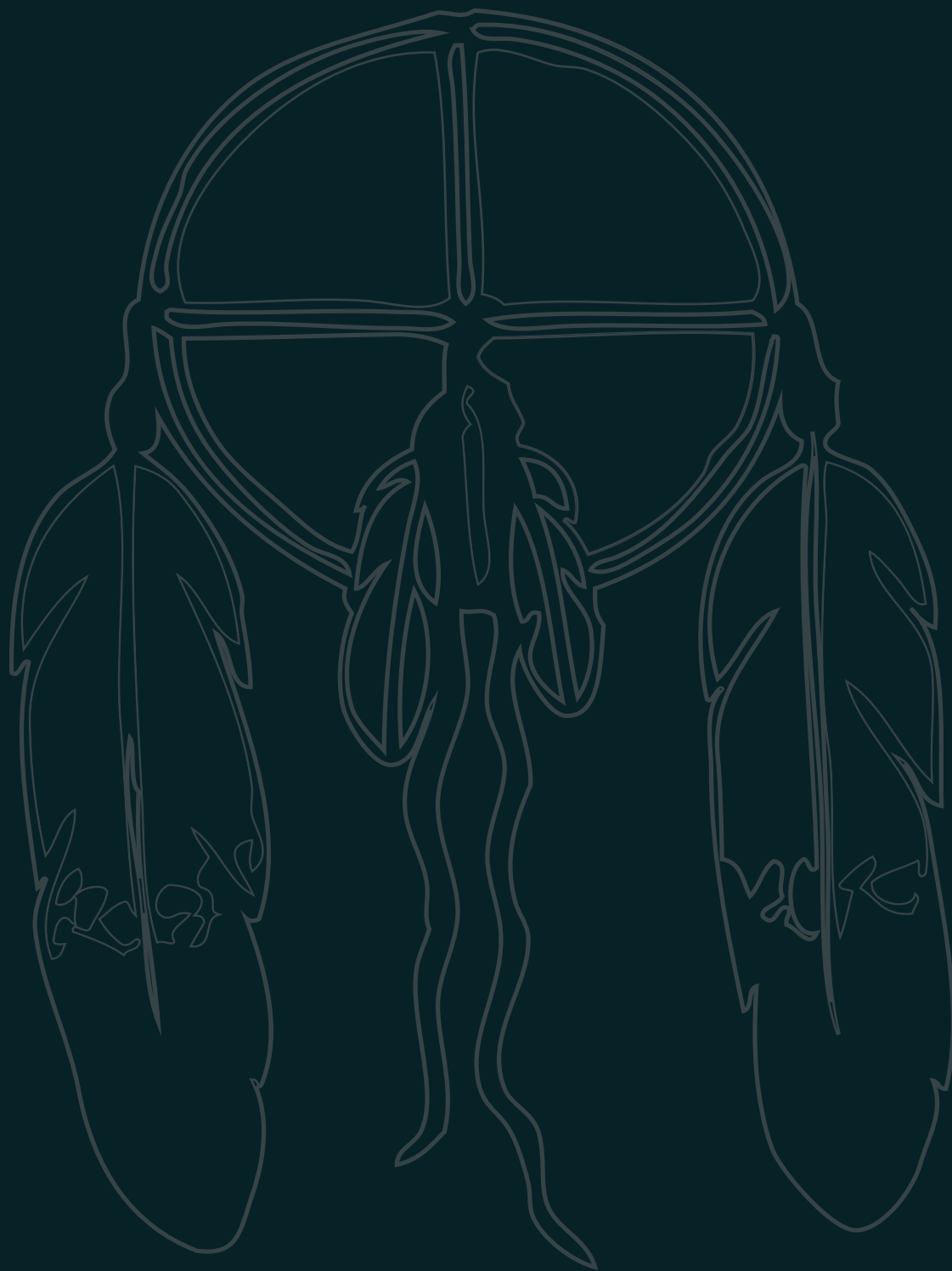


Browning Youth World Café



Browning, Montana 2010

Northern Plains Initiative

We are creating a region where people have the opportunity to thrive in the community they choose, where diversity is cherished, the environment is respected, and community pride leads to rooted generations.

The Northern Plains initiative (NPI) is a regional collaborative housed at Rural Dynamics Incorporated in Great Falls, Montana. Working in North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, and Wyoming, NPI seeks to empower a collective voice of hope for the region by cultivating sustainable relationships across borders. By focusing on creating thriving rural communities through cultivating program and policy resources and providing technical assistance throughout the region, NPI facilitates roundtable events and communication campaigns focused on identifying strategies and opportunities for translating vision to reality. NPI assumes the role of connector, informer, and advocate for rural and native communities across the region.

To learn more about the Northern Plains Initiative contact NPI@RuralDynamics.org. Visit www.PlainsTalk.org to visit the Northern Plains Initiative library of work, view other roundtable documents, and learn more about the Initiative's work across the region.

Browning Community Development Corporation

Browning Community Development Corporation (BCDC) is a private, not-for-profit organization created to foster social and economic improvements on the Blackfeet Reservation in Northern Montana. BCDC focuses on providing community members opportunities to become involved in their community, as well as fostering of social improvements, and economic development. BCDC envisions a viable, economically stable community, offering opportunity, independent growth and pride.

To discover more about the Browning Community Development Corporation contact info@browningcdc.org.

Rural Dynamics Inc.

Consumer Credit Counseling Service of Montana was founded in 1968 to provide credit counseling for the residents across Montana and Wyoming. Now known as Rural Dynamics Incorporated, the organization provides programs and establishes partnerships to help youth, individuals, and families achieve economic independence. Our vision is to develop and maintain a new generation of financially educated and responsible consumers. We are a private, nonprofit corporation, dedicated to providing confidential and professional counseling in aiding and rehabilitating financially distressed families, and individuals regardless of race, creed, color, sex, social position, or financial status, and in fostering community. We provide consumer education on money management and the intelligent use of credit.

In recent years, as we refined our services and expanded into new regions, we recognized that credit counseling, while a crucial step in the road to achieving a full and rewarding life in our communities, was only the first step. The Northern Plains are a unique collection of regions bound by a set of common experiences that requires a special awareness of the values, strengths, and challenges of rural life. Through this document we hope to spark greater collective efforts on behalf of our Northern Plains region. For more information about our organization, please visit our website at www.RuralDynamics.org.

Introduction

One of the most valuable assets the Blackfeet Nation possesses is its youth. In 2000, residents under age 18 accounted for nearly 40% of the total population of Browning.¹ How are young people engaged in the community? How are their voices heard? These were some of the core questions that guided the partnership between the Browning Community Development Corporation and the Northern Plains Initiative in bringing a Youth World Café to Browning.

Setting the Stage

Browning is the main hub of the Blackfeet Reservation, as home to roughly half of the population and the seat of the tribal government. In addition to having a large representation of young people, the Reservation has a poverty rate of 34 percent which is significantly higher than neighboring Flathead (13 percent) and Pondera (19 percent) Counties.² In a 2008 report published by Brookings Institution and the Federal Reserve System, we find the following disparities between the Blackfeet Reservation and rural Montana as a whole:

Comparison Statistics	Blackfeet Reservation	Montana (rural)
% Median household income, 2000 ³	\$24,566	\$32,434
% Homeownership rate, 2000 ⁴	55.5 %	70.9 %
% Unemployment rate, 2000 ⁵	22.6 %	6.6 %
% Residents under age 18, 2000 ⁶	38.2 %	25.7 %
% Students proficient in reading, 2005 ⁷	22.8 %	66.0 %
% Students proficient in math, 2005 ⁸	10.4 %	56.9 %

What matters more than statistics, however, is how young people perceive the realities of their life in Browning.

On the morning of the Youth World Café, we were thrilled to see that despite it being the middle of summer, young people from ages 12 to 28 came streaming through the doors and settled at our roundtables. Some were involved in the AmeriCorps Summer Associate Program; others were engaged in summer camps; while others were members of youth advisory councils. With such diversity among the participants, we anticipated a fruitful discussion.



Two of the participants volunteered to begin the day with a prayer, spoken in Blackfeet. After a round of introductions, we started an interactive community assessment utilizing Building Native Communities curriculum developed by the First Nations Development Institute. Participants identified goods and services available within Browning and the surrounding areas, the various forms of ownership (local, tribal, state, etc.); and what services they must leave the community to obtain. Having initiated this process of “asset mapping,” we then posed the following questions:

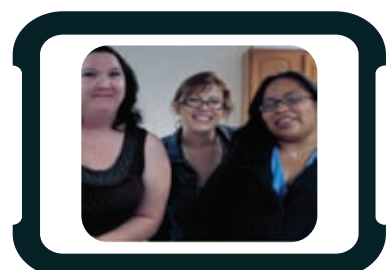
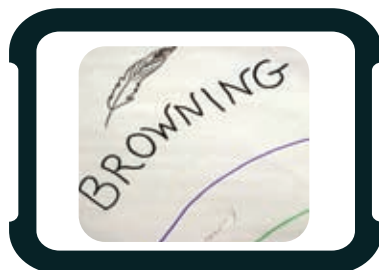
1. What is your vision for the future of Browning?
2. What would make you want to stay and prosper here?
3. What are the obstacles and assets that you see within your community?
4. How can we mobilize the community to address these issues?

In addressing these questions, the group drew out common themes and issues that they felt were important for the future of Browning. Overall, the message was that young people want:

- Hope, beauty, health, and togetherness
- A place where the land and culture are respected
- Personal health and community health
- Safe neighborhoods
- Academic encouragement
- Positive recreational opportunities

In identifying concrete steps to achieve this vision, participants identified common areas for opportunity and growth:

1. Neighborhoods, Housing & Infrastructure
2. Business & Tourism
3. Education & Health
4. Civic Engagement
5. History & Culture



Neighborhoods, Housing & Infrastructure

Addressing the most temporal, visual element of their community, participants voiced their desire for a recycling center to help clean up trash, a Humane Society for the stray dogs, and “Dry Rez” regulations that would allow little to no alcohol access on the Reservation. With the current shortage in housing, many highlighted the FEMA trailers for their affordability, but hoped that there would be future expansion of housing options—especially for young people. The participants also expressed the need for a new detention facility, as the current jail is condemned. They also made it known that young people are engaging in efforts to revitalize Browning through community clean ups.

Business & Tourism

Located at the gateway of Glacier National Park, the young residents of Browning were fully aware of their community’s tourism potential. Many spoke to the need for more hotels, museums, and cultural events—with proper marketing. They also spoke of how the tribe should be able to charge, or at least receive half of the profit, for entry to Glacier National Park through Upper Two Medicine Valley, as former ancestral lands and a site that holds great spiritual significance for Blackfoot Native Americans. When it came to expanding business within Browning, one participant shared a note of optimism in that “People want to stay and live in Browning—and bring their businesses here.” When asked if they felt that there was support for any entrepreneurial ideas young people might have, the answer was a resounding “yes”—the tightly-knit community offers an immense resource to business start-ups.

Education & Health

Although the participants felt supported in their ambitions to go to college, many felt that at high school, the emphasis was much more heavily on athletic rather than academic achievement. Many felt there needed to be a strong emphasis on early and continued learning when it comes to matters of personal health, and by extension, the health of their community. It was also suggested that community representatives from all fields of work come on a monthly basis to meet with students to educate them and inspire them with new ways to engage—through volunteer opportunities, internships, and the like. Participants did express much pride for the Blackfoot Community College and the \$6 million federal investment in the construction of its new ‘green’ math and science building.⁹

Civic Engagement

“Our ideas will influence others; we have to be involved in the decisions of our community, of our tribe,” one participant shared. It is not only the youth, but all of Browning that must engage. The AmeriCorps Summer Associates have spearheaded the creation of a community garden and a playground, and while they have a few Advisory Councils, there appears to be a need for more opportunities for cross-generational interaction in community planning and revitalization. “Pow wows, Indian dances, basketball games, and parades are good for the community—it brings us together,” one girl claimed. World Cafés also serve as an interactive venue, and as Tribal Vice Chairman Rusty Tatsey stressed after hearing the discussions of the youth participants, “If what you state today is what you will do tomorrow, then Browning is going to be a much better place.”

History & Culture

Reflecting on the past, participants shared that the “Reservation Era” has contributed to a core feeling of disempowerment and the inability to effect change. Their ancestors were punished for being themselves, for partaking in rituals and speaking their language. They spoke of the 1980s, when there was a revival that sought to bring back Native pride and re-root communities in their culture. They sensed that their generation was suffering from a loss of traditions, and many do not know their language. This is similarly true for their parents, and therefore the link is broken in the passage of cultural knowledge. For these reasons, participants expressed sincere dedication to cultural preservation and language retention.

Moving Forward

In looking to concretely identify means for civic engagement, State Senator and Tribal Councilman Shannon Augare offered his thoughts to the youth participants. “I am a big believer in these grassroots-type dialogues,” he said, “and if we are not engaging each of you to be involved, then our community will never prosper or experience economic vitality. If you are not leading initiatives and challenging elected leaders to think differently, then change will never happen.” As a community, he elaborated, Browning needs to be asking young people:

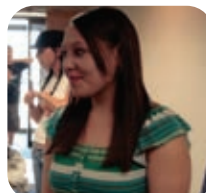
What is it that you need to be successful?

What will it take to send you to college?

What is it that we need to do to keep you safe?

Janice Coburn and Elva Dorsey of the Browning Community Development Corporation spoke of the Blackfeet Pride Coalition, which is a group of community partners that is spearheading work around various development and beautification projects and is eager to engage the youth (and their vision) in its efforts.

At the end of the day, one of the participants made a point to share the following: “I really enjoyed myself at this event. It has opened my eyes that there is much more to improving the community. We need to stay in our area to support businesses in Browning and encourage education for young people.”



Endnotes

1. U.S. Census (2000) Table SF1 P12: Sex by Age.
2. Brookings Institution and the Federal Reserve System. "Blackfeet Reservation, Montana," in *The Enduring Challenge of Concentrated Poverty in America: Case Studies from Communities Across the U.S.* (Richmond: Federal Reserve System, 2008), 69.
3. U.S. Census (2000) Table SF3 P52—Household Income in 1999.
4. U.S. Census (2000) Table SF1 H4: Tenure (Occupied Housing Units).
5. U.S. Census (2000) Table SF3 P43: Sex by Employment Status for the Population 16 Years and Over.
6. U.S. Census (2000) Table SF1 P12: Sex by Age.
7. School Matters (2004-2005), available online at www.schoolmatters.com.
8. School Matters (2004-2005), available online at www.schoolmatters.com.
9. "Senators announce \$10 million for three Montana tribal colleges." July 2008. Available online at: http://tester.senate.gov/Newsroom/pr_070908_tribal.htm



We provide programs and develop partnerships to help youth, individuals, and families achieve economic independence.

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