Celebrating 20 Years of Remembering, Reclaiming, and Reconnecting to Dakota Language and Lifeways
IN HONOR OF YVONNE LEITH
(CO-FOUNDER OF DAKOTA WICOHAN)
1939 - 2013

Yvonne Leith, Maza Okiye Win, Woman Who Speaks to Iron, her great grandmother’s namesake, was born on August 19, 1939 in Granite Falls, Minnesota to Lucinda Violet Flute and Harry Arthur Leith - Wakan HdiiDuta (Red Lightning) and journeyed on to be with her ancestors on February 25, 2013 in Granite Falls, Minnesota surrounded by her loving family.

Yvonne worked tirelessly on many Native issues over the course of her lifetime, including treaty rights, domestic violence, Indian Education and language renewal efforts. She was incredibly passionate about such issues, and in 2002 helped to found Dakota Wicohan, emboldening her commitment to Dakota language and lifeways.

She was the spiritual backbone and inspiration for Dakota Wicohan’s foundation and work, rooted in faith, spirit and vision. Despite her long battle with cancer, she continued to encourage, support, mentor, advocate, educate, teach and guide the work of the Dakota revitalization movement.

Yvonne followed her vision – returning to the original ways and teachings, especially kinship and wounsida – compassion. Tunwin had a gift and she generously shared that gift. We are grateful for the Dakota Wicohan legacy she has given us. We say, Tunwin, we will see you again.”

- Teresa Peterson, Dakota Wicohan Board Member

DAKOTA VALUES

The following values were shared with our youth by Dakota elder and teacher, Glen Wasicunna, and we continue to honor these values in our daily work.

Woinina (silence)

Silence has a different meaning to Dakota people. To develop who you are. Silence means that you are strong inside. It’s a part of us. The first, most important one when you’re young. We don’t have to yell or scream. Practice it to each other as an example.

Wowacinya (dependability)

You’re dependable to yourself. You take control of yourself, your health, your mentality, and your spirituality. Kids will look at you and want to be like you; lead by example.

Wowahoda (respectful)

Be respectful to yourself. You should be able to look at yourself in the mirror with confidence. It’s in the way you carry yourself, and the way you talk. Kids will look at you and want to be like you this way.

Wowaokiya (helpfulness)

Be helpful to yourself in all ways. Always help yourself first to make sure you’re well in every way possible. People will see this in you and want to be helpful to themselves. Be a good example.

Wowaunsida (compassion)

Be good to yourself. Don’t talk negatively about yourself. Pat yourself on the back, comb your hair and feel good about yourself. Kids will see this in you and want to be like you.

Wobdehedic’iya (positive)

Nowadays, it’s COOL to be negative. Being cool means you’re doing negative things. Walk in a positive way and talk in a positive way, because people can see and feel it.

Wowaditika (bravery)

Being brave doesn’t mean you go out in the cold without a coat on; being brave means you have to be all of the above. Notice the first one (silence) and the last one (bravery).
MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR
AND BOARD CHAIR 2020-2021

Han Mitakuyapi - Greetings Friends and Relatives

As Dakota people we carry memory and stories. Teachings that have been passed down generation to generation. We recall our oral histories and what our grandparents have taught us in order to maintain and sustain knowledge. There is strength and power in knowledge. This knowledge comes from our kinship and from the land because we’re related and connected to the earth and to each other. We’ve wondered what our relatives might have recorded as part of the Winter Counts for the years 2020 and 2021. We give thought to the most significant events of these past two years and what we were able to accomplish, but we also think about what we’ve come through. We’re grateful, grateful that we’re still here, that we’re still standing and that we came through incredibly uncertain times. That we all survived a global pandemic is miracle enough. And despite the devastating losses, pain and isolation of those pandemic times, we remained steadfast in the lifeways of our People; in our Dakota Wicohan. During the long COVID shutdowns, we continued to feed, gather and share traditional medicines, offer resources, teachings and encouragement. We went Virtual. As did most of the world. We adapted, as our People always have. We stayed connected in new ways. We found a way to continue.

We also challenged ourselves, our allies and our supporters, including our funders to lean into the uncertainty and the flashpoint of social change and justice. MniSota, the land where the water reflects the sky (aka Minnesota) is our beloved Dakota homelands, a land of abundance and beauty. It is also the backdrop to a series of injustices for our People, much of which culminated in 1862; the land grabs and corruption that led to the U.S. Dakota War, the mass hanging of our men relatives and the forced Marches and imprisonment of our grandmothers and elders. Later the world saw the depth of inhumanity and what depraved indifference looks like for Black, Indigenous, People of Color in Minnesota when George Floyd was publicly executed on the streets of Minneapolis during Summer 2020. Historical trauma is a continuous thread. Not always historical, because the traumas of injustice continue. As does our strength. And patience for major power shifts and change has worn thin. We cannot have come through these past two years without a renewed sense of purpose and justice. But we stand on the shoulders of all those who fought and blazed trails long before us. Renewal and reclamation is also a continuous thread made possible by the tears, prayers, blood and sweat of those who leaned into difficult times generations ago. We honor them by doing our best to be honorable. To honor one another today. To cherish one another today. To be medicine for one another today.

As a small, community-based, mostly grassroots, rural organization, we remain steadfast in the importance of our work, the importance of our language, the importance of our lifeways. It is grounded in the priorities and solutions of community, and that is what self-determination looks like. As our communities began to re-open and re-emerge from pandemic isolation in 2021, we too re-emerged, able to embrace one another once again and recommit ourselves.

We recommitted ourselves to our Dakota values, to our language, to artistic creativity, to connecting youth with horses, to teaching the meaning of the drum and the songs, to training public school teachers in social studies curriculum standards, and to the protection of our women and girls. And as we move into our 20th year, it’s amazing to see what has transpired since four women sat around a table to talk about similar visions and passions. We continue to do our best to live in our Dakota Wicohan - Our way of life, and to share its beauty.

Thank you for being part of this incredible journey with us.

Wopida Tanka - With great gratitude,

Eileen O’Keefe
Executive Director
Lower Sioux Indian Community

Gabrielle (Gaby) Strong
Executive Director
Wahpeton Oyate

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Thank you for being part of this incredible journey with us.

Wopida Tanka - With great gratitude,
OUR 20 YEAR JOURNEY

The Gathering of Hearts and Minds.
(Yvonne Leith, Mary Peters, Teresa Peterson, Gaby Strong)
To blend horses, language + lifeways as part of full revitalization of Dakota Wicohan.

Moved offices to the old Morton school building.

Began interviewing, documenting and recording first language elder speakers.

Family and Youth Language Camps with Lower Sioux Indian Community.

Elder Advisors - Genevieve LaBatte, Doug Peterson, Dean Blue.

“Dakota” the first horse to join Dakota Wicohan Tiwahed leads the first year of Dakota 38+2 Wakiksuyar ride.

Opened home/office in Granite Falls, MN. First paid consultants.

“Campasa yusipipi” picking chokecherry summer, 1st official family nest activity.

Moved to the old Morton school building.

Raffled a fancy bustle for $500.00 IRS filing fee for tax exemption. Incorporated as a nonprofit organization.

Documentary production, “Dakota Iapi Teunhindapi: We Cherish the Language” + booklet

Mni Sota Makoce curriculum project for MN 6th grade standards. Traditional arts incubator arts apprenticeships.

Sunktanka merged with Dakota Wicohan as a 4H horse program, Teacher Apprentice program- Katie Jo, Grace, and Dallas.

“Care for the Horse” Sunktanka Wicasuyapi translation of booklet with elder guidance and partnerships.

Elder Advisors - Genevieve LaBatte, Doug Peterson, Dean Blue.

“Tawokaga” Making beautiful things - art projects focus on quill work, traditional hide tanning, and quilting.

Moved into leased building in Morton MN.

Horse Regalia art project, Horse Dressing ceremony. We Are a Horse Nation Video w/ Keith Braveheart. Included a horse mask in the Minneapolis Institute of Art exhibit.

“The Horse Relative” video, Pioneer Public Television.

Dakota Wicohan and Sunktanka Wicasuyapi support Standing Rock No DAPL Resistance. MN American Indian Chamber of Commerce Eagle Award nonprofit of the year.

Covid 19 pandemic requires all virtual programming. Care packages and food distribution to youth and families.

“Re-emergence and continued commitment to nurturing the next generation.”

Anniversary - 20 years celebration video. 20 years of community changemakers. In honor of Yvonne Leith.
CARING FOR OUR RELATIVES DURING THE PANDEMIC

The Wicozani (well-being) Instrument developed by Dakota Wicohan, led by Dr. Teresa Peterson (Upper Sioux), co-founder of Dakota Wicohan and current Board Member, in partnership with Dr. Heather Peters, UMN Morris in an effort to increase well-being in youth and ultimately families and as a strength-based measure of overall health and well-being.

The Instrument is grounded in Indigenous paradigms emphasizing relatedness and interconnectedness of mental, physical, and spiritual health and assesses an individual’s perception of their current wicozani as well as how important an individual’s wicozani is to their quality of life.

Due to COVID-19, the instrument pivoted from being utilized in person to virtually by way of Zoom, with small groups of youth gathering to engage in discussions focused on stress and appropriate and culturally relevant solutions, with guidance from program assistants.

The tool provides a discussion format for validating emotions (especially in this hard time), and discussing how one is doing mentally, emotionally, including feelings of hopelessness or sadness. It also:

- places power in the hands of the individual;
- values the individual’s ways of knowing;
- views the individual’s perspective as valid;
- changes the deficit-based narrative around Native health;
- provides individuals with the opportunity to:
  - create their own definitions and factors of health;
  - identify where they are at on their continuum of health;
  - take ownership over their health;
  - see themselves as healthy; and
- build on existing areas of healthy behavior.

The tool is anticipated to provide a valuable baseline/measurement tool that Dakota Wicohan can use to periodically assess progress and help inform adjustments to virtual programming and at-home support - with the goal of utilizing the tool beyond the pandemic. The hope is to exemplify to the youth why and how their wicozani is important to their quality of life and how to maintain that.

As an addition to youth being able to access this tool, Dakota Staff compiled periodic ‘Dakota Care Packages’ that were delivered to youth that included supplies for making medicine, teas, balms, body wash, healthy snacks, personal hygiene supplies, materials for traditional art projects, as well as smudging and cleansing supplies.

DAKOTA IAPI (DAKOTA LANGUAGE)

The youth have been extremely committed to creating videos for their language class, with 6-12 boy and/or girls participating after school every Wednesday for 1.5 hours. Although they can be shy when the camera gets rolling, they remain committed to the task. Generally the class begins with a refresher of the prior week’s lessons, with youth creating flashcards for that week’s language teachings whether that be shapes, colors, family terms or others. The card games Dakota uno and Dakota bingo have also arisen as a tool for practicing the language.

ITANCANPI LEADERSHIP PROGRAMS

KOSKA BOYS LEADERSHIP PROGRAM

Every Monday the Koska boys group, led by Butchie Eastman, meets with a focus on drumming. The boys are taught songs, including ceremony songs, pow wow songs, song translations, pronunciation as well as guidance on determining when it is important to use each song. Additionally, the boys were able to make their own hand drum to utilize during round dance singing.

In September 2021 Butchie Eastman stepped down as the Dakota language teacher, but Darwin Strong was recruited to fulfill the role.
Every Tuesday the Wiciyenna (little girls) and Wikoska (young women) group meets. The program is geared toward girls and young women in grades 5-12 and has provided the space for them to collaborate on numerous projects including arts and crafts, beading, ribbon skirt making, painting and drawing. The Wikoska have stepped into the role of ‘helpers,’ assisting Youth Coordinator Gianna Eastman to set up food, lead projects and help the younger girls. These actions allow them to better develop their leadership skills and serve as positive role models to the Wiciyenna.
SUNKTANKA WICAHYUAPI (THEY CARE FOR HORSES) PROGRAM

The Suntanka Wicahyuapi program has grown tremendously, gaining increased demand over the last 2 years. In 2020, rides did commence, but with strict adherence to safety protocols given COVID-19. Both boys and girls ride in their own separate groups and are taught by Youth Coordinator Giana Eastman that the mood and outlook one carries can greatly affect your ability to control your horse. In addition, the horse can pick up on a handler's and/or rider's emotions, which means the youth must be in a good headspace when they come to the ranch.

The traditional medicine sage is always used to smudge before anyone gets on the horses, to help cleanse negative emotions and rebalance. A typical flow of a session entails youth catching the horses, grooming the horses, saddling them and then riding, further sharpening horsemanship skills. However, the program provides for much more beyond riding. Youth are also able to practice gait, including walk, trot and lope, games such as barrels and poles and trail riding. Participants engage in the program in pursuit of fun and for more invested individuals, preparation for riding in rodeos, country fair and local fun shows.

Currently the 5 advanced girls ride twice a week, while the 7 youth in the boys group and 12 remaining girls attend for leisure once a week. To conclude each ride, youth unsaddle, unbridle, brush the horses again, and some get fed some grain. In addition, they are advised to put out hay and check the water for the horses. Prior to wrapping up the session, youth are invited to share reflections on lessons their horse taught them, struggles as well as what went well.

WICONI WAKAN NI PO (LIVE THE SACRED LIFE)

Every other Monday the Wiconi Wakan Ni Po (Live the Sacred Life) suicide prevention group meets. The formation of the group was born out of the need to address the high rates of suicide in Native communities by providing cultural resources and activities to surrounding communities. The group welcomes all genders, but primarily consist of girls.

In 2020 the group developed their name, Wiconi Wakan Ni Po, as well as their vision statement: to create a better future for ourselves and our families while promoting the importance of culturally appropriate mental health support within Indigenous communities.

As 2021 progressed, the group created a Facebook group, developed a new logo, tabled at local events and began assembling their own coping boxes, finding items to help the youth identify distressing measures. These boxes included items such as stress putty, fidgets, dry brushes, essential oils and therapy journals. These boxes serve as an alternative to resorting to negative methods of coping.
DAKOTA WICOHANPI: LIFEWAYS PROGRAM

TAWOKAGA

Tawokaga, the arts program led by Eileen O’Keefe, is the current lifeways focus at Dakota Wicohan. Due to COVID-19, much like other in-person programs, Tawokaga had to slowly transition to an online meeting space. In 2020, Zoom participation fluctuated and although participants hoped to meet in person for beading, activities had to be placed on hold until the following Spring for the safety and wellbeing of all. As 2021 commenced, the weekly art circle started up again and was accompanied by beading 101 opportunities, Dakota floral apprenticeships and workshops on Dakota ribbon skirts, pucker toe moccasins and parfleche.

Dakota wicoh’an or Dakota Life or life ways is an accurate description of Dakota Wicoh’an’s mission of preserving and encouraging Dakota culture. And I have been fortunate to have taken part in passing on some of my knowledge of beadwork and making buckskin. But I have been only one of many to get the opportunity. So much thanks to Dakota Wicoh’an- Wopida Tanka. Hau de miye do Was’icunhdinaz’ in.

- Walter “Super” LaBatte Jr. Pejuhutazizi

STORYTELLING + TRADITIONAL MEDICINE

Grace Goldtooth (Lower Sioux), who is the Dakota Wicohan language instructor and who sits on the Community Council of the Lower Sioux Indian Reservation, has been able to share the creation story (canupa) with the youth. She also spoke with them about traditional medicine, including cedar, sage and sweetgrass, as well as their benefits to the community’s well being. Additionally, Grace wove in discussion around the various traditional family roles and how to address family members and elders.

FINANCIAL REPORT - SELECT TOTALS

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FUNDERS

ArtPlace America
First Nations Development Institute
First Peoples Fund
Headwaters Foundation for Justice
Kandiyohi-Renville County SHIP
Midwest Environmental Justice Network
Minnesota Department of Health
Minnesota Department of Public Safety
Minnesota Department of Transformation
Minnesota Humanities Center
Minnesota Indian Affairs Council
Minnesota State Arts Board
NDN Collective
NoVo Foundation
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www.dakotawicohan.org

Facebook  
www.facebook.com/DakotaWicohan

Instagram  
@dakotawicohan

THANK YOU YVONNE

“We taught these children what it meant to be Dakota. To learn their history and to learn the language. I will continue to work in whatever capacity to make sure that the language is reclaimed, renewed and revived and will do so until I can no longer.”

- Yvonne Leith, Co-Founder of Dakota Wicohan