FACES OF CHANGE
REPORT TO OUR COMMUNITY
WE’RE DISRUPTING THE STATUS QUO.

Change doesn’t happen overnight.

It takes a dream.

A vision.

And people.

At Thunder Valley CDC, we have intentionally created an ecosystem of opportunity that creates deliberate action and systemic solutions as large and comprehensive as the historic challenges facing our community.

We are building our power to accomplish lasting change through dedicated grassroots practices, increasing our community’s ability to flourish and setting an example for Native and rural communities everywhere.

Isn’t it time you meet some of our faces of change?
YOU SHOULD KNOW AARON BLACK BULL.

At Thunder Valley CDC, workforce development means more than creating a job opportunity—it means actively building the capacity of our program participants—and our community.

Our Workforce Development Through Sustainable Construction Program works to expand job skills, support educational pursuits and nurture personal goals. Our approach creates an environment where participants like Aaron Black Bull are able to pursue their dreams for the future. “One of the things I’m shooting for is to become an electrician,” he says. “I like working with my hands and seeing how things work. Electrical work is just something I really enjoy doing. I’d like to start my own business someday.”

In addition to learning hands-on construction skills, Aaron and his fellow participants also complete construction safety classes, set and pursue educational goals, develop Individual Success Plans, attend personal growth trainings (such as Equine Therapy), and complete a Native-based, workplace stress management curriculum. These additional channels of development build our participants’ ability to not only develop healthy work habits, but to also embolden their confidence in achieving any goal they are setting for the future.

For Aaron, that means setting goals with entrepreneurship in mind. “There aren’t a lot of professional electricians on the reservation so people have to rely on businesses that are sometimes an hour away. If I started my own business I could help provide that service to the community. I’ve watched my dad help people out, you know, changing an outlet here or a light switch there, and it makes me feel like this is something I could do that would be useful.”

To help him expand his skill set, on each construction job Aaron not only learns construction skills from our Construction Coordinator, Lenny Lone Hill, but he also works closely with local electrician, Darwin Eagle Elk, to gain more experience. “Darwin and Lenny are extraordinary teachers. It’s always good to have people who are older and more experienced than you teaching you. Right now it is good to learn what I need to look out for and the best ways to do things from people who have been doing this work for a lot longer than I have.”

When Aaron’s not getting hands-on experience at work, he’s in the classroom of the local college on the reservation. “I’m taking classes at Oglala Lakota College in Electrical Technology. It can be really tough to juggle work and school, but you have to make sure you have the motivation to get up every morning. I do, not only because this is a really amazing program with good people that you can tell really care about your future, but also because I feel like it’s time to get responsible now so that I can give back to my parents. They were always at my side growing up so now part of my paycheck goes to them to help pay for bills. It feels really good to be able to do that.”
More than a statistic.
While the Workforce Development Program works to change challenging statistics on Pine Ridge, participants say it isn’t just about the skills they gain or the academic encouragement they receive. “If I need a ride to class, someone will get me there. If I want to know how to make a business plan, someone will show me where I can learn that,” says Aaron. “This isn’t just a job, it’s like a family.”

Learn more at www.thundervalley.org.
We’re about to build a strong foundation for the future.  
52 percent of the workforce on Pine Ridges does not live here. By building climate change adaptable, energy efficient homes, we are not only addressing the housing shortage but also ensuring safe, healthy and affordable homes for future generations.

Learn more at www.thundervalley.org.
YOU SHOULD KNOW ALAN JEALOUS.

Nearly 4,000 homes need to be built, just to adequately house the current population.

Overcrowding, deteriorating homes and limited housing options mean that often young people starting families struggle to find a home where they want to raise their children. “I grew up in a log cabin with no running water or any bedrooms. We had a wood stove and had to cut wood all the time,” says Alan Jealous, a soon-to-be first-time homeowner in the Thunder Valley Regenerative Community. “It was a struggle to grow up that way and even though it taught me a lot, I want better for my son.”

A father of one young son, Alan made the decision to pursue homeownership after realizing what a difference a stable home could make for his family. “I see how our people struggle when we don’t have quality homes and can’t afford to pay utilities because most homes are not made to be energy efficient,” he says. “Our people deserve better. We deserve nice communities and I think it starts with having a nice home that you can build a future in.”

Alan is working hard to build that future, both by pursuing higher education and working a full-time job as the Assistant Construction Trainer at Thunder Valley CDC. By being part of the process of constructing the Regenerative Community, Alan sees why buying a home is a good investment.

“I’ve got to admit… the thought of buying a house was really intimidating at first, but I just thought about what is best for my son. These are going to be really nice houses and we have programs to make them affordable for every income level,” he says.

The energy efficiency of the homes will result in drastically lowering energy bills for homeowners, who often pay hundreds of dollars a month just for utilities. The homes aim to have utility bills as low as $50 per month, allowing families to invest that money elsewhere—into things like savings accounts, home maintenance and every day living expenses.

“When you think about everything that will be in this community—a greenhouse, or the poultry system we’re building—it is a reminder that the groceries and other things I usually have to travel for miles and miles to get will be right here, close to home.”

Alan will be participating in the Self-Help Program when construction begins on the first homes in the community, adding more to his already busy schedule. But he doesn’t seem worried and is ready for the challenge. “I truly believe our people will benefit from this and I’m just grateful to be part of it all… to be a part of this change.”
“TODAY IS THE BEGINNING OF THE END OF POVERTY ON PINE RIDGE.”

A lot has happened in our first decade.

Perhaps none as historic, though, as the groundbreaking of our new housing development and community in 2015.

For all of us at Thunder Valley CDC, it signifies not just the next phase of our work—work lead by our people, for our people.

It is proof, once again, that community can be at the center of every decision we make. And that together, we can determine our own future.

Yes, this is how change happens.
The groundbreaking isn’t the only thing that happened at Thunder Valley CDC this past year. See for yourself.

In 2015, $38 million was invested on Pine Ridge with support of the Promise Zone.

In our Lakota Immersion Childcare, 20 students learned to speak Lakota at least 75 percent as well as they speak English.

One of our Workforce Development Participants used his Individual Development Account to purchase construction tools to start his own business.

40 families participated in our Homeownership Education Classes in preparation for future homeownership.

Youth planned six events for other youth in our community. Over 400 people attended these events.

The food from our community garden provided 50 percent of the produce to our Lakota Immersion Childcare this year.
YOU SHOULD KNOW NICK HERNANDEZ.

Nearly 95 percent of the food consumed on the Pine Ridge Reservation is brought in on trucks from hundreds of miles away, with very little fresh produce available. The high costs of quality food in the handful of convenience stores mean that too often our people must opt for high calorie, low nutrient food items that are cheap and processed enough to have a long shelf life.

But Nick Hernandez wants to change all of that.

“Food is kind of the only source of life,” he says. “If you don’t have food or water, you cease to exist. You need to be able to nourish your body.” Hired this year as the director of our new Food Sovereignty Initiative, Nick is disrupting the status quo concerning how food is produced, traded and consumed on Pine Ridge.

“Our ancestors knew where their food came from,” he says. “For thousands of years we based our lives around a ‘food economy’ where finding food was a staple of life. Hunting, gathering and trading with other tribes not only meant fresh food but lots of physical activity and extensive knowledge about plants and animals. Now we don’t even know where most of our food is coming from. That needs to change. We are going to change it.”

In fact, we already are. We started with a large community garden, and the construction of a small chicken coop, both of which Nick sees as steps to eventually building a sustainable food economy on the reservation. “My grandmother always had a garden and growing up I never paid that much attention to it,” he says. “But as I got older I realized how incredible it was to indulge in the fresh fruits and vegetables that she grew. It made me want to grow my own garden because I could see the self sufficiency—the freedom—that was present in growing your own food.”

The Thunder Valley CDC garden produced over 200 bags worth of produce this year, which was then distributed to local community members. “Fresh food isn’t just about healthier eating. It’s also about educating ourselves,” Nick says. “When people can experience the difference between a garden tomato and a store bought tomato, there is a light bulb that goes off and people start to think more about where and how their food is grown and produced.”

Nick hopes that his gardens will inspire others in the same way his grandmother’s garden inspired him. “Not only can people save money by growing their own food, but they can also sell what they grow, too. Eat it fresh, can it, freeze it... there are so many options for learning how we can become an independent people that decides for ourselves what kind of options we want. We need to see the limited options here as an opportunity to actively create our own system, and determine what kind of foods we want available to our families. There is a real beauty in the opportunity.”
So what is Food Sovereignty exactly?

Food Sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems.

Learn more at www.thundervalley.org.
Less than 3 percent of our community speaks Lakota fluently. Until now.

We are working with adults through our Second Language Learner Program to learn the language in 300 hours (yes, it is possible!). So far, we have developed over 50 readers in Lakota to keep up with the educational needs of the children in our Lakota Immersion Childcare.

Learn more at www.thundervalley.org.
YOU SHOULD KNOW LISA YELLOW HORSE. AND HER DAUGHTER.

“What practical use does learning that language have in today’s world?”

It is a question that often arises when it comes to the revitalization of the Lakota language. But at Thunder Valley CDC, we know revitalizing our language is not only practical, it is essential to our ability to thrive. Just talk to Lisa Yellow Horse. She’ll prove it to you.

“Speaking our language brings a sense of identity,” says Lisa, a parent of one of the wayáwa čík’ala (little learners) at our Lakota Immersion Childcare Program. “I feel so proud of what my daughter knows in Lakota. It amazes me.”

Research proves time and again that sense of pride translates into some very encouraging statistics. Indigenous children learning their traditional languages consistently have higher self-esteem, higher rates of graduation, lower rates of substance abuse issues, and lower rates of suicide. With such promising benefits, Thunder Valley CDC has taken action to expand our language efforts into an entire initiative. The programs all work together to comprehensively increase fluency and elevate access to the Lakota language on a multitude of mediums.

“My daughter really loves watching the Wayáwa Čík’ala videos on YouTube, and I enjoy the weekly lessons that are offered to the community,” says Lisa. “These resources have helped me and my daughter to expand our Lakota vocabulary.”

Lisa’s mother is a fluent speaker. Lisa says she understands Lakota when others speak it, but is still learning how to speak Lakota herself. Her daughter Meona is learning as a first language speaker through our Immersion Childcare program. “I was able to speak it as a toddler but after I began school I had to learn English and I lost my ability to speak fluently. It has been my life goal to speak the language again—it is a big part of why I wanted to send my daughter to a place where she would be immersed in our language.”

The nuances of language can shape everything from problem solving to interpersonal protocols, and are a distinctive aspect of any nation of people. Language has not only literal meaning encoded into it, but layers of history and culture as well. By strengthening the language, we inherently strengthen who we are as Lakota people.

“I wish more people could see what the program is achieving. I want people to see these toddlers speak and understand the language so that they know what is possible… so they know that they too can learn the language,” says Lisa. “To be able to speak the Lakota language to both my mother and daughter is very unique and special, and I think others would be motivated by that possibility too.”
YOU SHOULD KNOW ANDREW IRON SHELL.

At Thunder Valley CDC, we know that lasting change for our reservation needs to come from collaborative efforts that help change the systems that aren’t working into systems that create opportunities for us to thrive. We need to develop comprehensive solutions that are as large as the historic challenges our people face, not just here, but across our reservation. Fortunately, this year significant progress was made in beginning to implement the Oglala Lakota Regional Plan when the Pine Ridge Reservation was designated as a Promise Zone.

“It is the first time in our history that we have had a mechanism in place for achieving common goals with so many different partners,” says Andrew Iron Shell, our Community Engagement Coordinator. “The Promise Zone designation connects local, regional and national partners in a way that facilitates more timely and more effective actions and outcomes.”

Being one of the employees that has been with our organization the longest, Andrew has seen how solutions must be in-depth in order to be successful long-term. “Band-aid solutions will only treat a symptom of the problem instead of the problem itself,” he says. “Because the reservation was created to make us unable to sustain ourselves, this designation is an opportunity to be invited to the table as partners in rebuilding our people. Our communities were so devastated by colonization that we really needed to rebuild even our most basic systems.”

Rebuilding many of those systems is exactly what Thunder Valley CDC is doing in its housing efforts, food sovereignty pursuits, language revitalization work and regenerative community development. “By deliberately going to the root of the issue we can create new systems for healthy, affordable housing and show how systemic changes are truly workable strategies out of poverty.”

Beyond the development of our organization’s programs, we also see collaborations and partnerships as one of the most effective strategies for breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty. With so many different programs, organizations and individuals working on any given issue, reservation-wide communication allows us all to share in each other’s knowledge and to see how each of our respective contributions fit in with the work of others. We also see the thoughts of community members at large as essential contributions to sustainable change.

“Engaging our local community by asking for feedback on everything from our programs to the design of our Regenerative Community means that they become stakeholders in the work—they see their input being valued. Including and recognizing the voices of the very community members we hope will benefit from the work means we show that this is about all of us together.

That is what excites me the most about the future—seeing what this work will do for our children and grandchildren. We are laying the groundwork for a future that is deliberately being created with them in mind.”
More than just a promise. Action.
The Promise Zone helps organizations leverage investments throughout the reservation through increased communication, competitive points on federal applications, and regular working groups with local and federal partners.

Learn more at www.thundervalley.org.