



IGLÚTĤOKČA

The traditional life of our Lakota ancestors was one of determination and ingenuity. Our enduring relationships with the Creator, and the environment, led us to develop a thriving society, durable economy, and comprehensive set of beliefs built on sustainability, spirituality and community.

Today, we return to those roots with a bold hope for our future: to change our reservation forever.

Thunder Valley Community Development Corporation is a Lakota-led grassroots organization working to create systemic change on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota.

We began as a small group of people answering a call to action, and in 10 years, have evolved into a comprehensive nonprofit. We collaborate with—and empower—Lakota youth and families to improve the health, culture and environment of our community in a way that heals and strengthens our identity. And in a way that transforms this place we proudly call home.

Through our work, we are actively disrupting the status quo and creating models of change that overpower intergenerational poverty and build momentum toward regional equity.

Inspired by our ancestors, and propelled by our youth, we are Thunder Valley CDC.

**THIS IS OUR STORY.**





How long are you going to  
let other people decide the  
**FUTURE** for your children?

**ARE YOU NOT  
WARRIORS?**

It's time to stop talking.  
And start doing.

Don't come from a place of fear.  
Come from a place of hope.

ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE,  
BUT YOU NEED TO TAKE  
ACTION.



There was an awful lot of complaining on the reservation. Teenagers and elders alike, troubled by their circumstances were losing hope and wanted something different.

These feelings weren't unwarranted either—the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, like many of our nation's reservations—has been beaten down by policies and systems that have created perpetual poverty.

And yet, we were ready for change.

Quietly, there were conversations among a small group of young people about how to create a movement. There certainly wasn't a shortage of people who cared about this community—community members who had ideas and who believed things could be different. Moving beyond the ideas, and into action, was going to be hard. But not impossible.

While the path forward may have been unclear, there was one thing for certain: No one was going to care as much about our people as we do. If we wanted transformation, we needed to create it.

That change needed to come from within.

The movement is here.  
**THE TIME IS NOW.**



From the very beginning, young people have been at the heart of our work. In fact, we were founded by young people who had young growing families.

During our early days, we started the practice of bringing youth to sacred sites around the Black Hills—it was an opportunity to expand their knowledge about Lakota culture, history and spirituality. By showing how the history of our people connects to our present, we also empowered them to think about how their actions would impact the future for their children.

During the first year we also built our Community House, creating a place to gather in prayer, community and gratitude. Men, women, elders and youth of our community came together to create this shared space, with our own hands. The house is still an important structure in our community today.

Then, as a newly formed organization, eager to grow, we went public at the Lakota Nation Invitational in 2008. One of the largest Native events in South Dakota, our kids were wearing t-shirts, handing out flyers, and connecting with other community members to discuss the future of our people.

We were going public.

And building our community.





In Thunder Valley CDC's early days, conversations and connections started to move the community forward in a thoughtful, meaningful, and progressive way. In the months to come, we gathered community members together for numerous meetings, resulting in hundreds of hours of discussions, ideas, and visions for the future.

These conversations carried an unexpected, but not unjustified challenge: To think about the possibilities and not only the challenges that might block the path to people's dreams.

Some felt these discussions might be creating false hope. Why tempt ourselves with these ideas when we don't have the resources to make them into reality?

Why create more broken promises for our people?

And they had a point—too often our people endured the disappointment of a hollow promise. But our youth had endless ideas and enthusiasm. If we wanted to create change, we first had to know what our people wanted for their futures. Even though we didn't have the resources yet, we knew:

"It doesn't cost anything to dream big."

Quickly, Thunder Valley CDC became a safe space for families to come together and have hard, honest discussions about who we are, what we wanted for our families and community, and how we would take steps to realize our hopes together.

In 2010, Thunder Valley CDC purchased 34 acres of land near Sharp's Corner in Porcupine, South Dakota. An area noted for its rolling hills, vast plains, and vibrant sunsets, the land sits at the geographic center of the Pine Ridge Reservation.

Conversations with community members began to form tangible objectives through the Oyate Omnicitye Consortium; or, the Circle Meetings of the People.

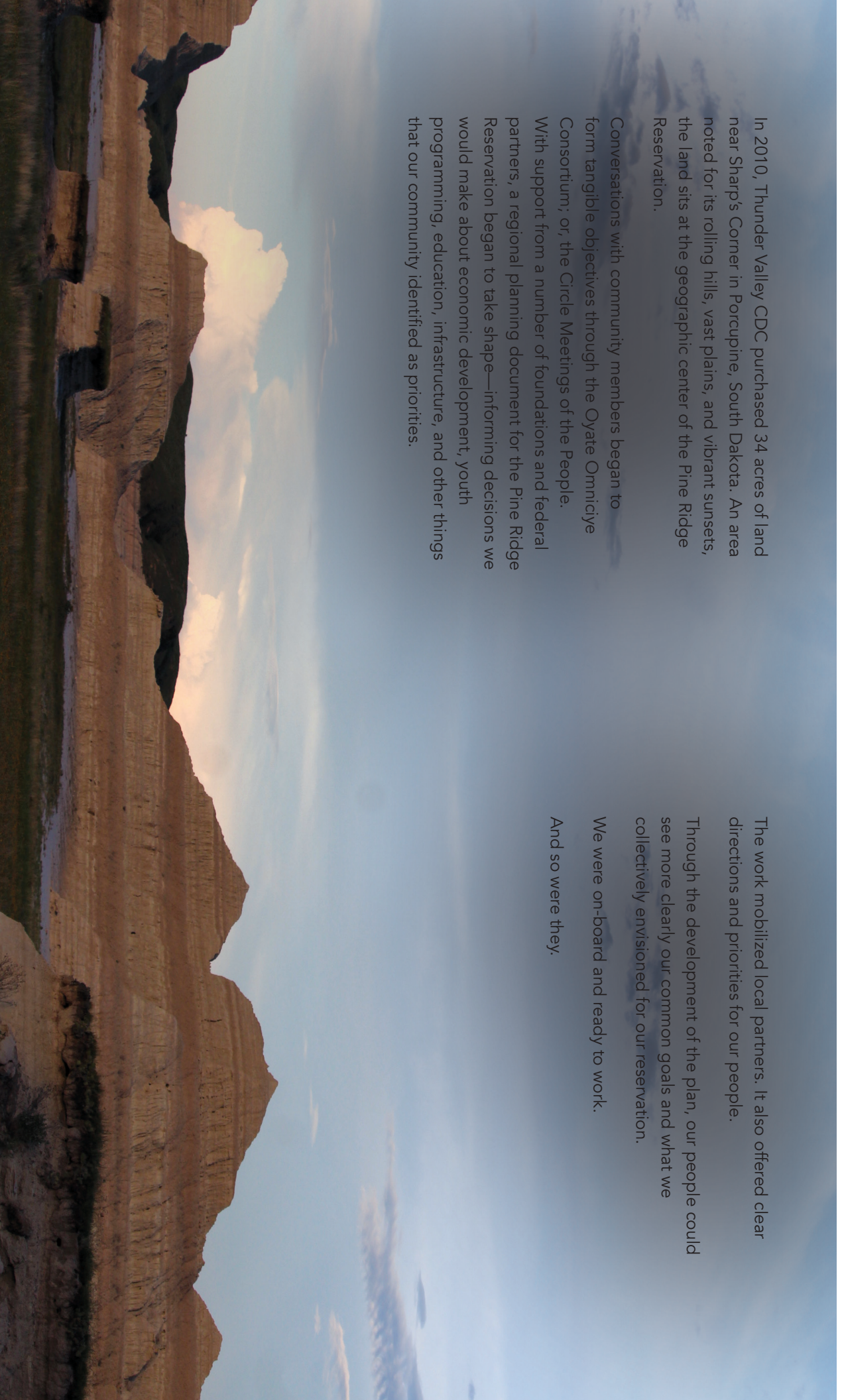
With support from a number of foundations and federal partners, a regional planning document for the Pine Ridge Reservation began to take shape—informing decisions we would make about economic development, youth programming, education, infrastructure, and other things that our community identified as priorities.

The work mobilized local partners. It also offered clear directions and priorities for our people.

Through the development of the plan, our people could see more clearly our common goals and what we collectively envisioned for our reservation.

We were on-board and ready to work.

And so were they.







We understood very early that solid, honest partnerships would maximize our chance of success. From our start, Thunder Valley CDC has been figuring out how to unlock doors previously closed on our people, cultivating relationships with partners that share our values as an organization, and recognizing that trust and mutual respect is the foundation of all quality partnerships. There's much we have learned in our first 10 years, but perhaps none more important that to accomplish our vision we must find partners who believe in our vision, share our values, and wish to dream big with us.

This starts by turning to our greatest asset: our community. Our people have walked alongside us every step of the way, nurturing and creating things that are good for our future. We've invested in our people from the start, taking our first four years to engage anyone who would talk to us in deep discussions about what we want, and how we would earn it.

As our organization has developed plans for our future, we have welcomed other partners to share in our journey of learning and creating, including master planners and architects who have recognized the importance of our culture, bolstered our ability to succeed by challenging us, and helped us to cultivate a plan forward. So, too, have Lakota artists and culture bearers of all kinds added their creativity into our design decisions—encouraging us to communicate our culture and identity in every space, and in every program we innovate.

Change happens at the intersection of diversity in people, sectors, and disciplines.

At Thunder Valley CDC, our work embodies that intersection.



“I’ve seen so many negative articles meant to show ‘the truth’ of Pine Ridge, but they only capture half of it.

Thunder Valley showed me there are people dedicated to making our home better by helping youth and preserving the earth.

**THEY GIVE ME HOPE**  
that someday the negative press  
won’t have any truth to them at all.”

—Sierra Concha

# HERE, nothing is created in ISOLATION.

It is grown and adapted and honed by a group of people who take an idea, contemplate it, try it out, adjust it, and then drive it forward. Every action, every step, informs the next.

You can see it throughout our history, and in the decisions we are making together for the future.

**2007.**

Thunder Valley CDC started out with youth visits to the sacred sites around the Black Hills region. Lakota kids had cultural, spiritual, positive experiences—but but would then go home and fall into the same situation. This had to change. It launched our systemic work.

**2010.**

Support from foundations and federal partners allowed us to bring our planning to the next level, engaging kids and elders to paint a vision for their community. Our youth taught us that if we are going to dream, we are going to dream big.

**2011.**

When we completed our first master plan, we thought the next step was to start building. But we realized that the plan didn't feel like our community. So we were brave, and risky, and scrapped it. The redesign—what guides us today—is more green, more efficient, and places our Lakota culture at the center.

**2015.**

An evening glow run and daytime color run remind us what happens when you set out to transform the community—laughter, joy, friendship, and more.

Thunder Valley CDC is more than just buildings. It is a place where dreams become reality, and change actually happens.

**2012-15.**

The world starts to know Thunder Valley CDC. President Barack Obama shines a light on our work, and legislators like Senator Tim Johnson (D-SD) and Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Julian Castro visit. The attention is a reminder of the reach of our work, and grounds our desire to root our work here at home.

**2016.**

We help put our community to work. Through the Workforce Development Through Sustainable Construction Program, the same comradery happening with our youth can be found on our construction teams as they pour concrete, link electrical lines, and construct homes.

“They have decided as a  
community to take  
ownership of their future.

**THAT MAKES ME HOPEFUL.”**

—Barack Obama, 44th President of the United States





Looking out at the land, our early founders could see what it would become—a “show-me place,” as Lenny Lone Hill, a construction trainer in our community, referred to it. “People will soon see what we are doing.”

With the purchase of the 34 acres of land, and the Oyate Omniciye Regional Plan in place, Thunder Valley CDC began moving forward, focusing programmatic efforts first on our youth through a Community Garden. We also got behind the ideas of other people and groups doing critical work for our people, like the Lakota Immersion Childcare Program that later grew into our Lakota Language Initiative.

Both programs were tackling two critical issues in the community—food sovereignty and a revitalization of the Lakota language. In a few short years, they have been nurtured carefully, and have grown into cornerstones of our movement.

Step into our Community Garden today, and you’ll find organic produce taking root. Planted and harvested by our Food Sovereignty Initiative and Youth Leadership Development Program participants, each year the plants—just like the program—take on a life of their own, growing to meet the needs of the community, and the ambitions of our youth.

You’ll also hear the sound of children in our Lakota Language Initiative, where kids are learning the Lakota language in an innovative, nurturing setting. Lakota children enter the program at 18 months, establishing language acquisition at a pre-verbal age. It serves as a foundation for continued fluency of our Native language throughout their lives, and positively impacts their self esteem moving forward.

This movement is one of empowerment, innovation, and learning. All of our work is place-based and comprehensive, centered on applying indigenous innovation in a way that honors our cultural heritage and is adapted for the needs and vision of our local community. You can see it in our people, our programs, and our structures.

In 2013, that ingenuity could be found in the piles of straw bales delivered to Thunder Valley CDC, used to build the first-of-its-kind straw bale house in our community. The home that stands today, built from the ground up by engineers and community members, represents our commitment to green, sustainable, net-zero affordable housing.

But it actually represents so much more. The house was an educational opportunity for our organization. It was a chance for us to refine our approach, and evaluate how we balance the costs associated with building a home like this alongside the need to create teachable moments that train a 21st century workforce. Ultimately we chose a different design for the remainder of the homes on the development. We stayed committed to the same goals by focusing on creating our own pathway out of poverty and building local skill and leadership capacity. By exercising our sovereignty, and creating a space that empowers our people to realize their fullest potential, this community goes beyond the bricks and mortar.

Some will say that it took us 10 years to build a home.

That's true. And we wouldn't have it any other way. For, within the walls of that first home are our dreams and values and lessons learned. And our legacy.

# What's the **LEGACY** you want to leave?



In June 2015, on a perfectly cloudless day on Pine Ridge, hundreds of children and families and elders gathered at Thunder Valley CDC, and the first shovels broke the ground, marking the official start of our Regenerative Community Development

But it wasn't only Thunder Valley CDC staff or architects or visiting dignitaries breaking ground. It was every single one of us. Every community member, local partner, federal partner, and more took part in turning over soil as a symbol of what we would cultivate together.



**“THIS IS THE DAY**  
we mend the hoop that was broken.

**We build the world  
that was promised.**

**And it will not be with letters of  
fire that we map the future, but with  
roots, houses, and planted trees.”**

—From “Breaking Ground,” a poem by Mark Tilsen to  
commemorate our groundbreaking.

Listen to the full poem at [www.thundervalley.org](http://www.thundervalley.org).



Housing is a major crisis on the Pine Ridge Reservation. Nearly 4,000 homes must be built in our community just to address the current housing shortage.

We knew we needed to be active in creating solutions that would provide our people with access to safe, affordable and sustainable homes where they could raise their families.

After our groundbreaking, construction began on the roads, water and sewer lines that are needed for our community. The actual homes also started to take shape, some constructed by women and men who are part of our Workforce Development Through Sustainable Construction Program. Launched in 2015, the program educates participants on how to build single-family homes from start to finish.

But the 10-month program isn't just about learning the construction trade. Each person completes an individual education plan and success plan to improve the financial capacity of themselves and their families, and in turn, build a stronger tribal community.

This program creates a national model to alleviate poverty and build sustainable communities while training the local workforce in green building practices. At Thunder Valley CDC, we are invested in a set of principles that shape the holistic goals of our citizens, developing a healthy energy-efficient model that empowers families to take responsibility for their future.



# WE are working to create SOLUTIONS

that are as large and comprehensive as the historic challenges facing our community.

During our first decade, we strengthened 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.

As we continue the movement, we will incubate and nurture programs rooted in a set of principles that empower families to take responsibility for their future, centered around seven focus areas.



## Food.

Pine Ridge is a food desert. Diabetes and other preventable diseases are at their highest rates here. We know we can be part of the solution. Through our Lakota Food Sovereignty Coalition, we are collaborating with others to strengthen our local food system, increasing access to healthy foods and economic opportunity through agriculture.



## Housing.

We need 4,000 homes to address the housing shortages on Pine Ridge. We're building affordable, energy efficient homes and creating opportunities for our people to find jobs, build assets and increase stability, so that housing can move from being a crisis to being a solution.



## Development.

Lakota imagination and ingenuity is at the center of our Regenerative Community. This is a place where tradition and innovation collide to ensure our people, planet and prosperity as a nation thrives.



## Language.

Less than 3 percent of our people speak Lakota fluently. Through our Lakota Language Initiative, we nurture our children by building a community of young fluent speakers who take pride in our past, and have confidence in our future.



## Workforce.

Our people need more access to jobs. We are creating them, building capacity by meeting our people where they are and developing skills while working within a team.



## Youth.

Half of our population today is under the age of 18. By creating opportunities for them to gather, learn, and lead programs and events, we set the stage for the future movement builders and leaders of tomorrow.



## Social Enterprise.

We wish to support the entrepreneurial spirit of our people, and have yet to find a mainstream model that is congruent with our Lakota people. Through a new Lakota Community Wealth Building Model, we are creating an inclusive, sustainable economy that addresses social issues and gives our people exactly what they want—and need.

# OUR PEOPLE are driving the ways in which we **DO THIS WORK.**

We are seeing with our own eyes, and are experiencing with our own hands, what it means to start something.

Much has happened in the decade since our call to action.

There is also much to work toward as we enter our next decade of transformation. With the support of our people and extended community, Thunder Valley CDC has ambitious hopes for the future.



## IN THE YEARS AHEAD,

1. New buildings will begin to take shape at an accelerated pace, giving our community a blend of home, retail, recreation, and community spaces to live, work and play in.
2. Our Food Sovereignty Coalition will lead initiatives that create affordable solutions to local food access, strengthen our local food network, and develop healthier community.
3. The Social Enterprise Program will nurture new businesses and Thunder Valley CDC programs by offering trainings and spaces that give entrepreneurs every opportunity to be successful.
4. Through our Lakota language efforts, we will create a pipeline of Lakota learners and create unprecedented access to our language in a variety of forms—from in-classroom and immersion experiences to at-home learning in a variety of media formats.
5. In all we do, we renew our commitment to regional equity so that we initiate systemic change that transforms the Pine Ridge Reservation.

**“THIS IS ABOUT  
ALL OF US—  
our children and our grandchildren.**

**We are laying the  
groundwork for a  
future that is  
deliberately created  
with THEM in mind.**

—Andrew Iron Shell





This work is about disrupting the status quo and developing new systems for our people, based on the needs of our people.

As we step into the next decade of Thunder Valley CDC, we will continue to move through our work in progressive and thought-challenging ways, while always taking a moment to pause, evaluate, learn, reflect and then continue.

Through our movement building, we are producing repeatable, measurable models based on our values that can be utilized by other communities to inspire viral, transformative change.

Our hope? To share what we learn—the successes and the failures—with people like you. People who are interested in knowing our story. And willing to share it back with others.

**THIS is how change happens.**

**On Pine Ridge.**

**AND EVERYWHERE.**



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  /thundervalleycdc |  @tvalleycdc | #howchangehappens

[www.thundervalley.org](http://www.thundervalley.org)

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