

## **The Expressive Arts: A Powerful Tool in Violence Prevention Education**

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**Summary:** This article will present the expressive arts as an educational tool, specifically for Native American youth. Poems from an ongoing group of girls, housed at the Kinlani Dorm in Flagstaff, Arizona, will be shared.

Youth in general, and Native Americans in particular, are open and responsive to all forms of expressive arts. “Expressive arts” refers here to a process of utilizing an art form for the purpose of personal expression. In the process, the individual or group generally discovers something beyond what they might have imagined they set out to portray or reveal. In other words, there is a surprise element in utilizing the expressive arts. This allows the individual or the group to discover something meaningful that was heretofore not known.

The process of discovery is greatly facilitated with the invitation to enter into this creative process. The mind, which can be a controlling element, seems to take a back seat as the hands and/or the imagination get working. The process of discovery is also furthered when the individual is then witnessed in the sharing circle, or even by only one other individual.

It is important to distinguish the utilization of an art form for the purpose of expression, from the utilization of an art form for the creation of a product. This isn't to say that the artist who creates a product is not also expressing his or herself through their work. The distinction is important, however, because many times individuals offered the opportunity to use some form of art for the purpose of personal exploration will say: “But I'm not artistic”. It's very easy to diffuse the fear of not making a pretty product by releasing people to be free to express whatever comes to them and giving them absolute permission to not have to share what they are creating. It seems that most humans have a need to bring forth what lives in the recesses of their psyche, and what's more it is rare, once having done so in a safe environment, for a person to not want to share this with another.

The process of sharing is always illuminating and healing, not only for the one who is sharing, but also for the witnesses. The place that one seems to draw from, when using art as expression, is often untouched by our conscious minds. Art gives this dormant place a chance to “speak”. Often the “story” told, from this previously silent or silenced place, gets to the heart of the matter.

In working with Native American Youth, one quickly discovers that, traditionally, there had been much less reliance on the spoken word. There is also a quality of reserve in their communication, and yet, clearly the same need for human connection and communication exists among these people. Also, Native American peoples have utilized

what we call art, as a pure form of healing and expression. Songs are a central feature in Native American healing ceremonies. These songs are profound “poems” in anyone’s eyes. Ceramic vessels may be decorated with the most exquisite designs telling a story and invoking a prayer for the one using the utensil. There are no end to such examples of how what one may call art, is thoroughly woven into the personal and collective psyche and culture of the Native Americans.

An aspect of Northland Family Help Center’s Community Education Program is to bring preventive education into the local Native American communities. As part of this program, a small group of girls was brought together at the Kinlani Dorm in Flagstaff. The Kinlani Dorm is a boarder town dorm housing Native American high school students from off the surrounding reservations. Students live in the dorm during the school year so that they can attend a local high school.

The girls in this group were identified as being at high risk for certain behaviors such as drug use, abusive relationships, and potential drop-out from school. The purpose of the group was to offer prevention education. It was clear that the education had to be engaging, because the girls could select not to come after the first session. Also, the education had to touch their personal lives in order to make for changing attitudes and, ultimately, behaviors. The decision was made that utilizing the expressive arts was the best way to proceed for the following reasons:

- It would speak to the cultural orientation of the Native American students, even the least traditional among them
- Creative art forms generally engage the whole person leaving very little room for boredom
- Creative art reaches each member on a personal level
- The sharing, done in a safe environment, builds a sense of community and belonging

Leading up to the poetry, as a form of expressive art, there were other forms of expression. large sheets of paper were used to create individual life-maps. Beautiful journals were designed to record personal thoughts and stories. Gradually, difficult topics entered the circle. When poetry was introduced as a means of expression, the path had already been paved to some very raw places in the individual girls. The sharing of the poems brought them closer to one another. More than any other activity, the members of the group, as revealed in our final evaluation, said that it was this that made them come to know themselves and one another; it was this that made them appreciate both the commonality and diversity of their experiences; it was this that made them take pride in their lives; it was this that gave them the courage to go on.

This selection of poems was written in the space of one hour. They were written by girls, freshman and sophomores, who grew up on the Navajo Nation where English is for many, if not for themselves then for their parents, a second language. The poems are unedited both by the authors as well as myself. Even without this concern for editing, they stand as beautiful channels into the center of the authors’ lives and from there, into our own hearts.

The following poems are from Native American youth who participated in our program.

“RUINED”

You ruined my life  
when I had a life.  
You are about six inches tall  
a bit small, you'd think.  
On the outside you come in many shapes  
sizes and colors  
so beautiful  
but on the inside you're so ugly and  
disgusting  
My life suddenly seemed so ugly too  
You use your looks to deceive  
But what do you receive . . .  
Nothing  
You viciously tore us apart  
like we were nothing  
To me you're a killer  
A murderer, a deceiver  
YOU ARE ALCOHOL!!

LOST

Standing in the dark.  
Hearing voices from different directions.  
Calling me to go with them.  
Going to the call and finding trouble and guilt  
where the calling came from.  
Then finally a light appears  
and I no longer feel lost.  
Now feeling happiness and  
no more guilt

## DON'T HURT ME

As she's coming down the hallway waiting to  
hear his lecture that she thought he  
never say  
Instead she gets yelled at as he gets off the seat.  
Knowing that he's going to hit and push her  
she waits for his fist to put her  
on the ground.  
Her mom watching him do this, not doing  
anything to stop him  
Watching her get hit around the ground and also  
getting pulled around by her hair.  
Getting pushed into the table, being yelled at to  
get up and being kick back down  
as if she was a rag doll.  
Her blood not stopping, her face twice the size,  
looking in both their eyes  
seeing if they really like  
looking at her like this.  
Thinking they both do like looking at her like this  
because it's not the first or the last.  
Not being able to go anywhere cause of her face  
and he wanting to keep his beating  
of his own daughter a secret.

## NEVER EVEN

I never even learn about you  
I never even compared our sizes  
of our hands and our feet  
I never even got the chance to  
speak to you  
You never got the chance to know  
who I am  
You never got to see the next day  
You never got to hear the words  
I have spoken.  
You never got to understand  
how I feel.  
We never got the time to  
spend together  
We never got to know one  
another  
We never even got the chance

to tell how much we  
Loved each other  
But the thing we got to  
do together was you always  
being by my side  
And father I will always  
Love you  
I'm your daughter.

### TAKE ME AWAY

*The Navajo Nation resides within four mountains that the people consider sacred. The Navajo words in the poem name these four mountains. This poem reflects this student's feeling of walking in two worlds, a common struggle for these students.*

The beautiful smell of wet dirt touches my nose  
To the east Tsisnaasjiniin', was where the clouds were headed to  
I look all around me; the land is red with many juniper trees  
A coyote howls, a crow caws and rabbits dash from  
bush to bush  
. . . I smile  
The sun has begun to set  
To the south, Tsoodzil, stood proud and tall  
It seems life was taken away as everything darkens  
A soft nose of a horse nudges gently at my side, looking up  
then down she is  
painted like the desert  
. . . My heart gallops away  
At the horizon the sky is light blue  
To the west Doko'oosliid cannot be hidden for it jets out  
reaching to the  
heavens  
Behind me the thunder rolls as the storm moves further away  
I continued on with my friend, flying across the desert  
. . . We soar  
Up ahead I see a Hogan and a corral not far behind it  
To the north Dibe'Nitsaa watched over my family  
My mother covered her loom, my father brought in wood  
They look to see me coming, and then they wait patiently  
. . . I am home  
I jump into their loving arms  
They are proud to have me back home  
Mutton stew and Fry bread filled the air

We were in eternal happiness  
... We are family  
Just then I heard horns honking, sirens going off  
I lift my head, look out the window  
In every direction buildings are around me  
The air smelled of smoke and exhaust  
... I want to go home