

RETURN TO THE HEART FOUNDATION



**Heart Story Curation:
Indigenous Feminist Justice
Leadership and the
Philanthropic Call to Action**

**SPECIAL RESEARCH EDITION
2023**

IN COLLABORATION WITH:



UPLIFT THE MATRIARCHY

RETURN TO THE HEART FOUNDATION

RESEARCH REPORT

ABSTRACT

Of the \$3.9 Billion dollars flowing within the philanthropic sector, only 0.04% goes to Native American serving organizations according to a 2019 report (NAP & Candid, 2019). An even smaller amount goes toward supporting efforts for Native American women and girls. This mixed-methods study seeks to address the dire gaps in funding within Native philanthropy and seeks to define Indigenous Feminist Justice efforts from a post-COVID-19 lens. Evidenced through this study, the research highlights Indigenous resilience, as it relates to Native Women leading healing efforts in Indigenous communities. The researcher conducted a national survey and hosted two focus groups to better understand what kinds of healing efforts are being led nationally so that recommendations can be made through private investments, venture capital opportunities, as well as continued fund development. Through the recognition of Indigenous Feminist Justice Leadership strategies, the field of philanthropy can learn best practices around trust-based giving and is a call to practitioners to fund this work.

Keywords: Indigenous Feminism; matrilineal; matriarch; kinship; cultural responsiveness; post- colonialism; Native Women; Philanthropy; trust-based giving.

[Read the full report here.](#)

Compiled by:
Joannie Marie Suina, Ed.D
(Pueblo of Cochiti)

RETURN TO THE HEART FOUNDATION

TRADITIONAL HELPERS & HEALERS FUND

This work honors Indigenous Women who are fiercely dedicated to healing to their communities from all the settler colonial violence and extraction that desecrated the land, body, and spirit of our Ancestors. These modern-day Warrior Women are helping and healing by pairing traditional and contemporary knowledge to creatively mobilize for Indigenous futures.



ABOUT THE TRADITIONAL HELPERS & HEALERS FUND REPORT

73

GRANTEES SINCE
INCEPTION

100K+

FUNDING +
TIME TOWARD
THE FUND

12

MONTH
LONG STUDY
TO COLLECT
& ANALYZE
THE DATA

26

NATIVE NATIONS
REPRESENTATION
THROUGH THE
RESEARCH STUDY

15

STATES WHERE
GRANTEES
WERE
LOCATED

94%

RESPONDENTS
REPRESENTED
FEDERALLY-
RECOGNIZED TRIBES



63%

RESPONDENTS
BETWEEN THE AGE OF
40-49 YEARS OLD

INTRODUCTION

Philanthropy within Native communities, though not explicitly named, has always been a vital element and extension of core cultural values (Nickel & Fehr, 2020). For all Indigenous peoples it is a thoughtful caretaking of land, the earth's natural resources, and the cyclical calendar of traditions, customs, and ceremonies that help to guide long-term sustainability of all humanity. Native philanthropy can also be thought of an inherent responsibility to one another to provide support through various facets, including food, clothing, shelter, ceremony, as well as monetary in some cases. The idea of scarcity became prevalent with the arrival of visitors to Turtle Island beginning 1492 (Laduke & Cruz, 2013).

As such, the foundation of philanthropic wealth started with the accumulation of colonial wealth in the Western Hemisphere enacted through principles of the Doctrine of Discovery endorsed by the Roman Catholic Church. The Roman Catholic Church's—Doctrine of Discovery, explicitly enforced the policy of the settler colonial project by declaring any lands discovered in the New World to be seized. This doctrine principle was soon legitimized by nation states in legal precedent processes, such as in 1823, the United States Supreme Court case, *Johnson v. McIntosh*. Chief Justice John Marshall's opinion firmly established the United States "that the principle of discovery gave European nations an absolute right to New World lands." At the very beginning of colonial contact, the imposition of settler colonial patriarchy has manifested itself into community political structures through the socialization which has not only been extractive, but it has also proven to be violent against Indigenous people, particularly women, Two-spirit (2s) people, and children (Smith, 2014). The unjust taking of Indigenous lands, vital resources, and chattel slavery has provided a foundation for generational philanthropic wealth to be built which has also been achieved through forced Federal Indian Policy (Dulfano, 2017; Suzack, 2015). These are just a handful of examples by which ethnocide has been justified as to gain access to resources establishing vast amounts of colonial wealth.



Indigenous Womxn's roles have historically been redefined in the American Diaspora by the media, anthropologists, ethnologists, as well as Settler Colonialism and forced Federal Indian Policy.

- Violence on the Land, Violence on Womxn
- The rise of MMIW/MMIG/MMIP
- Rebirth + Rematriation during COVID-19

The decimation of Indigenous cultural and kinship relationship systems was torn apart through the historical critique of Indigenous women by colonists, anthropologists, ethnologists, and various religious denominations that have labeled them as “subservient, acquiescent, and exotic” (Green, 1995; Green, 2007; Klein & Akerman, 2000). This gendered racial abstraction has further constituted ideas that women do not make community because their voices are not a part of political governance structures, especially in spaces that continue to secure colonial capital power (Krouse & Howard-Bobiwash, 2009). White supremacy and the settler state has also continued to fragment Native Nations through the jurisprudence of federal, state, and tribal relations, making it even more challenging to actively address violence against the land, people, and natural resources. This further lends to a plethora of monetary resources that are generated from stolen land and stolen resources.

Indigenous Women have been the backbone of their communities’ leading such grassroots efforts stemmed in culturally responsive solutions which can further be referenced as “heart work” (Minthorn, 2022; R2HF, 2022). Such modern-day efforts include raising capital to fund projects that support intergenerational communal healing like at the R2HF. Much of these projects address global epidemics including bringing attention to the Missing & Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls crisis (MMIWG), violence against women and girls, and basic fundamental human rights issues. Indigenous Women are also creating healing and regenerative projects that support Native Women and Girls. Digital Media outlets have not thoroughly documented this, especially from a philanthropic lens to assess how much monetary support is funding efforts by Native women and girls. The lack of funding and the historical exotification of Indigenous women has also proven to be lethal to Indigenous communities because of the continued jurisdictional challenges that Native Nations experience as it relates to prosecuting Non-Native perpetrators (Smith, 2017). This, coupled with the extraction of the earth’s natural resources and the violent decimation of land through fracking, nuclear testing, and nuclear waste disposal is a violent metaphor for the continued abuse that is experienced by Native Women; violence on the land is violence on Native Women.



INDIGENOUS FEMINIST JUSTICE LEADERSHIP

This very activation of funneling philanthropic resources created a slate for what can best be described as Indigenous Feminist Justice Leadership (IFJL). IFJL can be best defined as an intersectional approach to provide grassroots action, advocacy, reciprocity, and rematriation to Indigenous communities (Green, 2007; Singer, 2020).

IFJL efforts supported a critical recentring of Indigenous Women’s voices during the coronavirus crisis and continue to do so as we move toward a post-covid world. An exponential number of community-based healing efforts were led by Native Women, throughout the time of COVID-19, which demonstrates the vast variety of healing modalities known to Indigenous communities. Such efforts further activated the opportunity to empower, uplift, and support intergenerational community healing. Illuminating the stories of such efforts are vital to recentring community wellness, creating healing models, and are also an opportunity to further contribute to the discourse of Indigenous Feminist Body Sovereignty and Self-determination. They also point to the ongoing need for philanthropy to fund those efforts, especially where state, federal, and tribal dollar’s fall short.

RETURN TO THE HEART FOUNDATION



Despite ongoing efforts, a snapshot of IFJL philanthropic healing efforts, during the time of COVID-19 as well as currently, across Turtle Island has not been evaluated. Most often, the devastating statistics surrounding MMIWG, substance abuse, poverty, and unemployment rates tend to lead capital campaigns within non-profit giving circles (Wegner & Lawless, 2021). The Return to the Heart Foundation (R2HF) is a Native-Women led organization that supports empowering visionary Indigenous Women-led initiatives as an intermediary grant maker and was founded in 2020 by three Native women (Eagle heart, 2020).

The four focus areas that shape the heart work at R2HF include: **1) Civic Engagement, 2) Climate Justice, 3) Narrative Change, and 4) Restorative and Regenerative Development.** The Co-founders and Co-Chief Executive Officers are visionary Native women who are experienced in creative community building and are called to bring healing and action to Native communities through their ancestral wisdom. They believe impact and cultural shifts come from a diversity of perspective and skill. This team holds unique expertise in advocacy, civic engagement, community development, healing, narrative change, philanthropy, strategic planning and leadership development.

PROMOTING HEALING WITHIN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

In the first year of operation, the R2HF established two key initiatives: The Society Fellowship and the Traditional Helpers and Healers Micro Grant. Both provided funding and project support for Native Women and Girls, with a specific focus of supporting healing efforts. The Traditional Helper and Healers micro grant supports projects that restore traditional lifeways to improve physical, mental, spiritual, cultural, and economic health in Indigenous communities.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The design of this mixed-methods study required a national call to Native American Women, over the age of 18 years of age, who are deeply invested in supporting and leading grassroots healing efforts in Native communities. Grassroots efforts included passion projects that are self-funded or funded with a one-time micro grant; or those initiatives and programs located within a nonprofit or charitable organization and/or fiscally sponsored initiatives. The goal behind the data sweeps were to better understand where philanthropic dollars were funding healing efforts led by Native Women across the United States.

The focus of the design came from deep reflection about the pragmatic layers that exist between donor and grant receiver when dollars make their way toward the project or initiative. The flow of capital has continuously withheld the racial and ethnic wealth gaps, so much that data on Native Americans is not accessible (Asset Funders Network, 2022). Such philanthropic gatekeeping prevents marginalized groups from achieving wealth, addressing racial equity gaps, or even having sustainability through funding projects. IFJL has the opportunity to be considered a critical methodology to further catalyze efforts by Native women for Native communities.



Philanthropic gatekeeping also exists through the grant application processes and granting of awards to applicants. Many applications are highly technical, require several hours of work and explanations, and require applicants to find solutions to issues such as gentrification, homelessness, food insecurity, social issues, substance abuse, violence, cultural and linguistic revitalization, and income insecurity to name a few.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Healing is an essential component of ending intergenerational historical trauma to make space for cultural maintenance and revitalization. The opportunity to be inclusive as an approach to bringing forth concepts such as IFJL, especially in consideration of the current climate of Native Nations facing the overturning of such pieces of legislation such as the Indian Child Welfare Act, that provides an avenue to protect children and community and the recent denouncing of the Doctrine of Discovery by Pope Francis (Brakeen v. Haaland, 2022). This research seeks to make space for community cultivation by investigating how a matrifocal connection can empower Indigenous Feminism to be further elevated within the theoretical frameworks to be further explored through this study. To better understand this topic, the following research questions guided this study:

- 1) How are Native Women being funded in the philanthropic sector?**
- 2) What kinds of needs exist to fund healing work led by Native Women within philanthropy?**

RESEARCH OVERVIEW

SAMPLING POPULATION

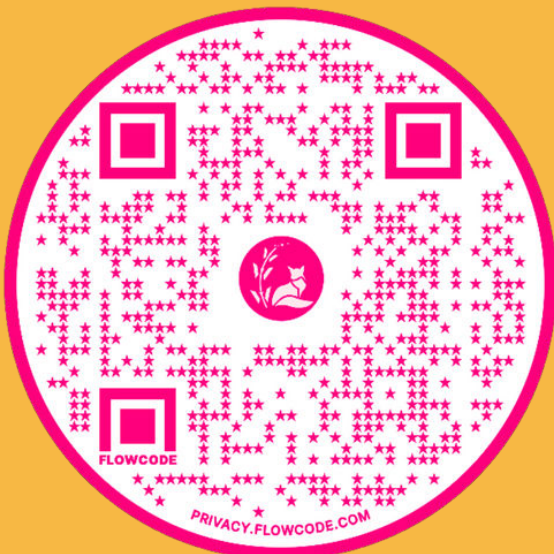
The population for this study was self-identifying Indigenous Women, enrolled in either a federally recognized or state recognized tribe who live and work in the United States. Survey participants were between the ages of 18-69 years. This age range of participants was chosen because this is reflective of the open call for Indigenous women who are eligible to apply for the R2HF Traditional Helpers & Healers Grant. This demographic also reflects an intergenerational exchange of knowledge, including those who attended federal Indian Boarding schools, as well as those who have overcome economic hardships.

RECRUITMENT

This research study included snowball and purposeful recruitment methods. The criteria for the survey participants were anyone identifying as a Native Woman, including 2SLGBTQ+ Relatives who have been a part of leading healing efforts in their communities. Healing grassroots efforts included passion projects that are self-funded or funded with a one-time micro grant; or those initiatives and programs located within a nonprofit or charitable organization and/or fiscally sponsored initiatives. Social media posts were developed specific to the call and were shared on both Instagram, Facebook and the project website. Each post detailed the call for participants as well as the purpose of the data collection, along with a link to the Google Survey. It was estimated that the survey took 10-12 minutes to complete and participants had the opportunity to upload photos of their work or themselves in action. The survey consisted of 25 questions.

SURVEY LOCATION

Flowcode & Web-based Location



METHODOLOGY

Indigenous Storywork Methodology integrates the values of respect, reverence, responsibility, and reciprocity which compliments the working logic model of rematriation as described in Heart Story Curation ([download the full dissertation here](#)). Turning to storytelling and oral tradition to help guide this study allowed for a unique, culturally responsive approach to capturing the experiences of Native Women leading healing efforts, along with a process to develop future comprehensive supports through philanthropy. Respect for such processes and opening a safe space requires thoughtful planning and this was executed from the moment emails were sent to participants. Each invited participant was greeted as, “Sister.”

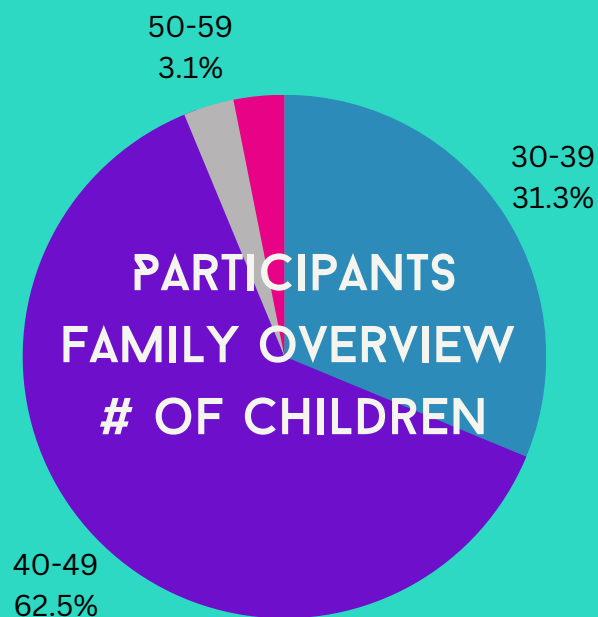
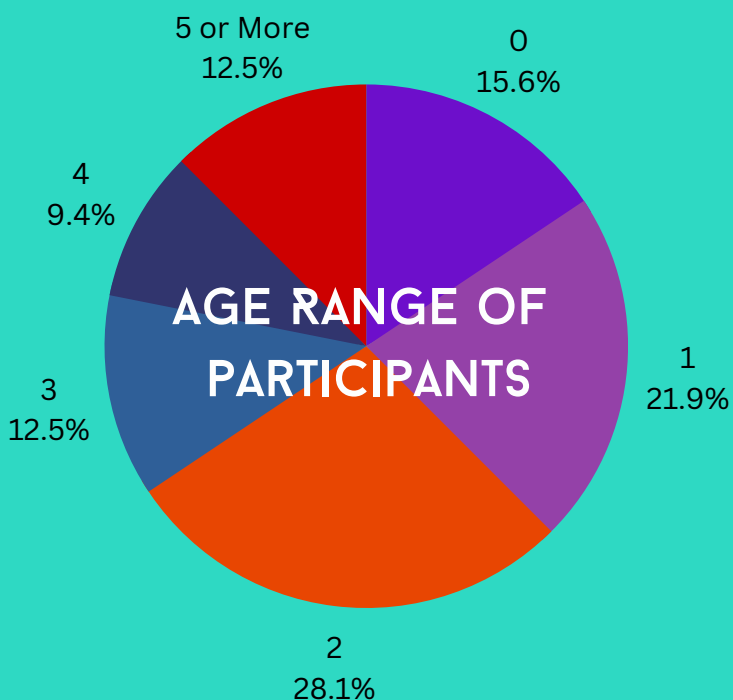


TO DATE R2HF HAS SUPPORTED 73 GRANTEES, WHICH PROVIDE AVENUES FOR RECONNECTING THEIR COMMUNITIES TO TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE, FOOD/MEDICINE, CEREMONIES, AND LANGUAGES.

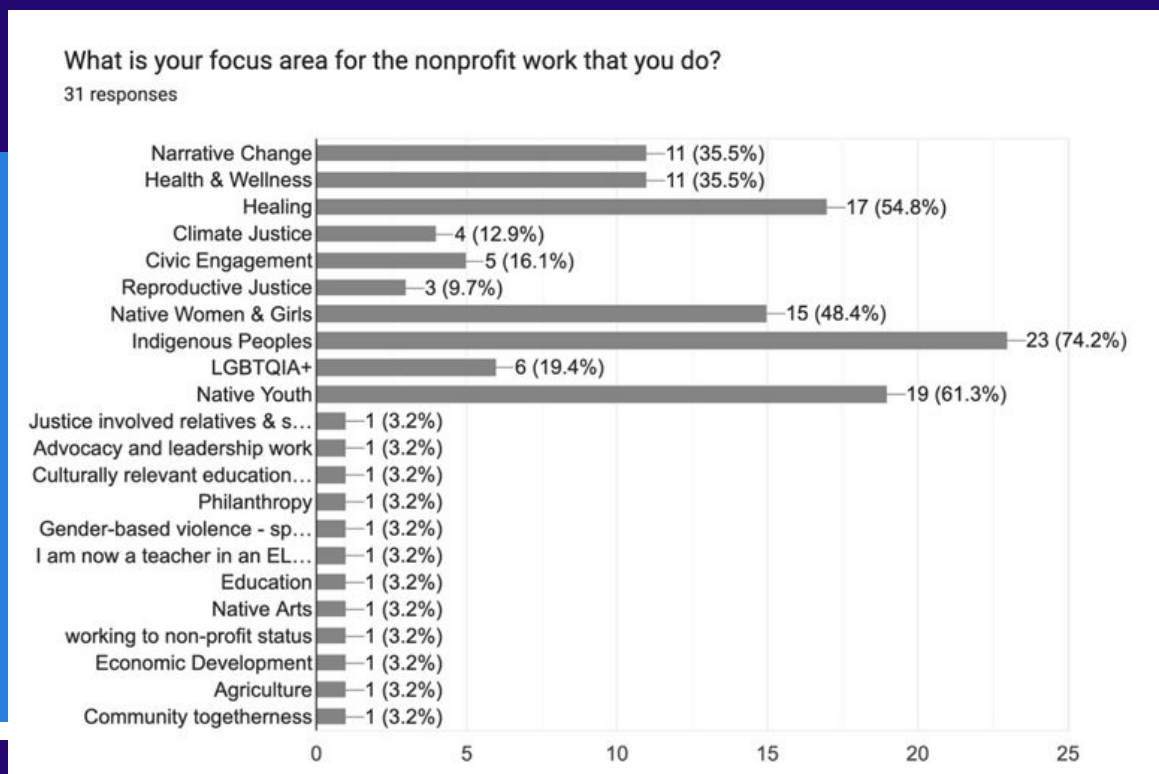
In addition to the funds described above, R2HF is an intermediary grantmaking organization that provides grant funding to Native Women and Girls who are fighting for Indigenous causes across the globe and restoring traditional lifeways for the health of their Tribal communities. Support extends well beyond funding and includes walking alongside grantees to provide direct project support, so they gain marketable professional experience. R2HF helps them develop leadership skills and program management capabilities as they plan and execute their projects. They are also given hands-on training in traditional media, social media, video production, and digital marketing as their portfolios are amplified their work. For the purpose of the research, the researcher focused on third-round grantees who were awarded their grant funding for their project in the Spring of 2023.

RESEARCH SURVEY – PARTICIPANT SNAPSHOT

*NATIVE WOMEN LEADING HEALING EFFORTS:



The focus area for the work and where healing efforts are being lead are in the following areas:



32%

HAVE BEEN IN
THE NON-
PROFIT
SECTOR FOR
5-10 YEARS

What can be gathered from these responses are that the focus of the work identifies as supporting Indigenous peoples as a whole, healing efforts, Native Youth, and Native Women and Girls as the top four focus areas. This aligns with the work at the R2HF and the continued development of funds to support the work. Additionally, 68% of participants identified funding the work as the biggest challenge related to their work/project. When asked what has helped them to heal from their experiences, respondents shared the following:

What has helped you to heal from any of your experiences?

- "Reconnecting to my traditional ways has been a huge part of my healing journey. Having others that have come from similar experiences sharing their hope and support. Also, having support to put my offender behind bars."
- "Utilizing ceremony and traditional ways of prayer to connect to Creator and my higher self. Also, yoga and meditation."
- "Sisterhood, faith, land, movement, animal relatives, and connection."
- "Doing things for my people."
- "Time."
- "Just keeping a positive mindset and looking ahead, regardless."
- "Connecting with other Indigenous women and femmes about their issues with tribal leadership and figuring out ways to circumvent tribal politics to serve our people."
- "Support from leadership."
- "My ways of knowing and being."

MOST FREQUENTLY USED WORDS in the Focus Groups

49 HEALING

47 THANKFUL

36 WOMEN

32 TOGETHER

**32 BOARDING
SCHOOLS**



The qualitative data collected for individual questions were exported from Zoom as MP4 files and then transcribed. Using the themes that emerged from the data, Chart below details the most frequently used words during the two focus groups. Many of the individual comments shared by respondents consisted of multiple themes. The top six words/set of words used in order of frequency goes as follows: 1) Community, 2) Healing, 3) Thankful, 4) Women, 5) Together, 6) Boarding School. Many additional themes can be drawn from this data. The frequency of these words further ties into the literature around Indigenous Feminisms and the cultural study of values (Suzack, 2017). The literature further describes such feminisms as being generally ambivalent about what it meant, but such themes held very strong positions on the goals of women's work to respond to community (Nickel & Fehr, 2020).



Rematriation through Indigenous Feminist Justice Leadership, though not always formally distinguished as this, is sacred to kinship traditions that have been inherited and passed on to us from our ancestors. As Native women, we are creators of life, protectors of future generations, cultivators, and nurturers of pollinating heart-wisdom into being. The teachings we carry are essential for the well-being of our societies, clans, tribes, and nations. The honoring of Native Women leading healing efforts has allowed for a communal connectedness. Such cultivation of “for us, by us” solutions are critical to the discourse because we know and understand the needs of our Nations.

Another goal of this research is to evaluate how philanthropy can support such kinship models. Many organizations focus on direct services or connecting constituents to such partner organizations and because of the competitive nature within the sector it is only natural that many of these funding opportunities create a breeding ground for scarcity. This has also been historically influenced by the lack of funding flowing within community, especially in regard to venture capital opportunities to fund solution-based work that is steeped in cultural ways of knowing.



The acknowledgement of kinship through everyday practices, has also been in response to living through a pandemic when ceremony came to a pause and how community tried to maintain such practices within individual homes until it was safe enough to participate together as we did, pre-pandemic. The kinship circles of women and our connectedness are celebrated as an honoring of the matriarchal symbolism prevalent in the research. Such reflections from participants also allowed for a deeper evaluation of their respective culture and the extensive use of Native language and such stories.

MODERN DAY WARRIOR WOMEN

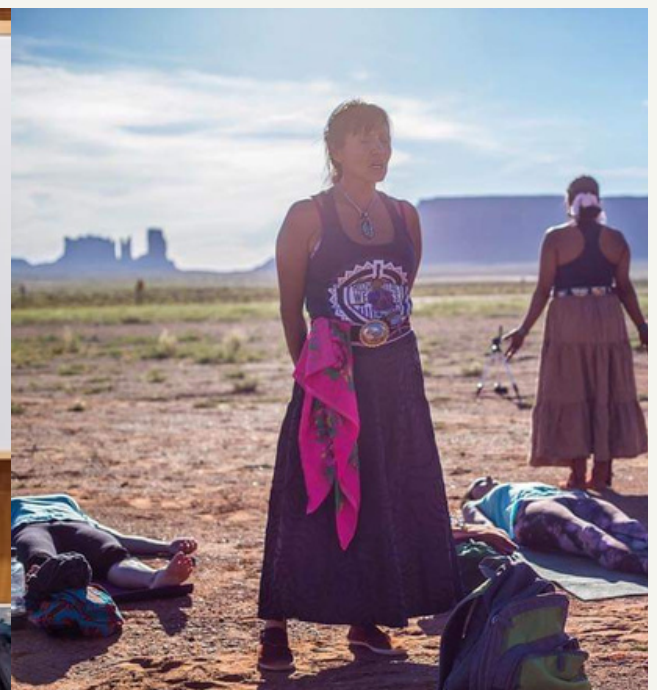
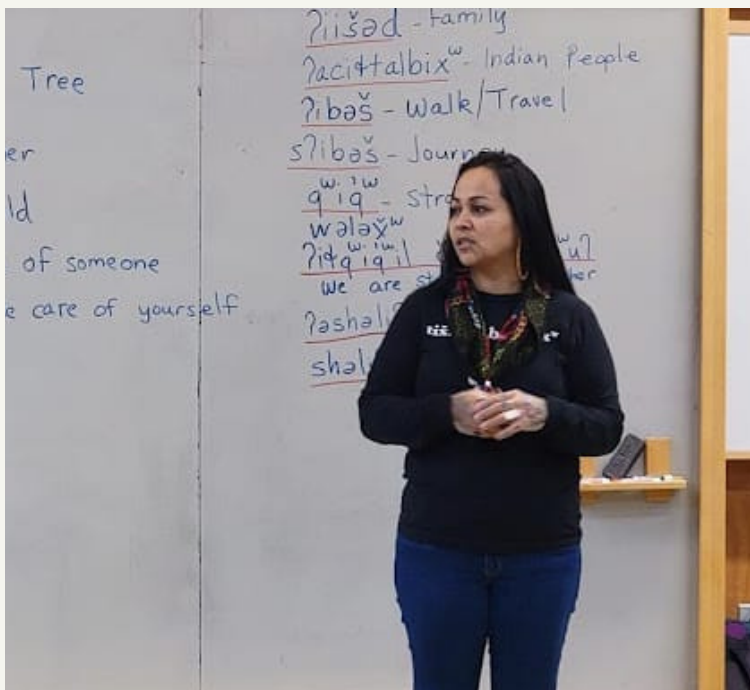


R2HF CALL TO ACTION

We know that philanthropy has been situated to create silozation between communities and amongst organizations, it is important to consider what kind of funding mechanisms might be able to be developed to showcase a streamlined way of connecting with community.

Visioning a system that is not deficit based and that shares equitable avenues towards obtaining scholarship, fellowship, grant making dollars, and a plethora of shared traditional knowledge and resources, we propose the following recommendations:

- Philanthropy needs to fund Native women who are leading healing efforts;
- The sector needs to create a place at the table for Native Women to have an equitable voice and to share their solutions for healing intergenerational historical trauma in contemporary times;
- Trust-based philanthropy needs to be implemented across the sector and in spaces of investment where deep and intentional deployment of funding can be made in support of programs;
- Comprehensive Planning needs to take place at a state-wide level and also nationally to continue to build transformational leadership, and
- UplifttheMatriarchy.com will continue to serve as a digital meeting space to support the sharing of resources and ongoing opportunities for table talk discussions.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the Return to the Heart Foundation for whom this work and data gathering has also been dedicated to.

Note from the Researcher-
Joannie Marie Suina, Ed. D
(Pueblo of Cochiti)

This research is dedicated to our Grandmothers and to all our Ancestors whose strength and resilience is a part of our DNA. Here's to our healed future generations- may we know them, may we be them, and may we raise them. [Read the full dissertation here.](#)



**JOIN THE CIRCLE
TO SUPPORT
NATIVE WOMXN:**



We thank you for your
continued support in
our programs.

RETURN TO THE HEART FOUNDATION
1625 Clay St. 6th Floor
Oakland, CA 94612

WWW.RETURN2HEART.ORG