**Fact Sheet for Parents and Educators**

**History**

The content for the teaching material in this curriculum comes from direct experience developing and implementing the Ogitchidag Gikinooamaagad education program over the past 20+ years. We continuously review current literature about youth development and peer education and incorporate strategies that prove most effective along with our own thoughts, knowledge, and experiences working with adolescents. We learned the basics of acting with our first group of Ogitchidag Players through an intensive on-site workshop with Spider Woman Theater from New York City, a reputable native acting ensemble with many years of experience. We continue to learn from Pangea, Illusion, and various Indigenous directors.

The first six adolescents we recruited were our friends' children, and nieces and nephews. We began simultaneously teaching them information about HIV/AIDS and the basics of acting. We started working intensively, every day for two weeks with the actors/ peer educators, and then after the two weeks, it was reduced to weekly sessions. As issues came up, we dealt with them in the best way we knew how. AIDS-phobia and homophobia were issues that came up immediately and so we brought in speakers, including people living with HIV/ AIDS to share their experiences with the youth. We used street outreach workers, spiritual teachers, and people living with HIV/AIDS as well as our own staff to provide the human element to broach these difficult issues. It became clear immediately that we needed to deal with issues around death and dying, domestic abuse and love, in order to achieve the kind of emotional investment we needed from the actors/ peer educators.

During the past 26 years, we have trained approximately 1,000 young people as Ogitchidag Peer Educators. In 2010, we moved to film work and held two statewide film festivals. In 2012, we resumed theater as the Ikidowin Youth Theater ensemble. The younger sibling of some of our older actors who are now teachers, bankers, college and high school graduates often join the program. It is through this experience that we have developed the curriculum to assist other organizations in providing prevention and intervention services to adolescents. Our primary intervention group is the Ogitchidag Players/Ikidowin. The secondary group is the adolescents with whom we have limited contact through peer education sessions. Our tertiary intervention group is the audience members who view our plays and participate in discussion groups.

It is important to create a safe environment for adolescents. Trust is a major issue and needs to be addressed continuously. There are also legal issues with which programs need to comply regarding reporting child abuse or sexual abuse of children. The adult mentors or staff must be willing to model healthy, positive communication, and behavior for the group. Information alone is not enough; motivation and skills practice are key components in education and acting. These two elements of the curriculum need to be reinforced by encouraging adolescents to state their intentions and then to practice using skills in situations they confront in the schools or with their families and friends.

Cultural identity needs to be continuously reinforced. Indigenous adolescents live in a racist and sexist society and face challenges that threaten their self-esteem daily. Positive images and behaviors that are culturally grounded need to be presented to them. One way of incorporating positive cultural messages to our children is to learn the traditional and contemporary tribal practices. The incorporation of singing and dancing into theater pieces is one way to enhance tribal identities. Spiritual practices are another. There are many individuals who are willing to provide these kinds of teachings to adolescents.

**About the Curriculum**

Each unit addresses a new topic and is arranged in an easy to use format. Every unit contains six main sections. The sections include the purpose, background information, materials needed, a list of the activities, a description of activities, the estimated time frames, and any necessary additional resources (usually in the appendix). An evaluation plan and instrument to evaluate the intervention strategies is available for programs that choose to invest in this process.

A variety of activities are used such as visualizations, art discussion, role-plays, videos, brainstorming, talking circles, and ceremonies. Every unit is active, thought-provoking, and culturally grounded. Real examples, history, statistics, and experiences are brought into play in all of the units. Throughout the curriculum, group leaders are encouraged to bring in people from the community to strengthen community support and share additional knowledge and wisdom with the peer educators.

The acting lessons are woven throughout the curriculum. However, there are some basic acting lessons that are included separately. These activities are clearly outlined step by step. The lessons that include story development and build on strengthening the creativity of the actors/peer educators are included in the foundation.

Our stories and songs are powerful teaching tools to promote healing and wellness in our Native communities and for our youth.