

'A better future for our children': Healing Lodge of the Seven Nations hosts groundbreaking for wellness center


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Nez Perce member Liz Arthur-Attao woke up Friday to a regular spring afternoon: 48 degrees and spotty sunlight. Wind brought a chill. The ground was soft and fertile.

It was the perfect weather for The Healing Lodge of the Seven Nations to host its groundbreaking ceremony on a wellness center in Spokane Valley, extending a mission of healing youth through practices grounded in Indigenous values.

"Mother Earth is soft," Arthur-Attao said. "... The ground is our mother and (the new center) is going to cause healing for families, and when you heal a family it's going to touch their hearts."

Healing Lodge programs are embedded in healing practices of the Spokane, Kootenai, Kalispel, Coeur d'Alene and Nez Perce tribes, and the confederated tribes of the Colville and Umatilla Indian Reservations. In 1986, the seven tribes united to combine their limited healing resources, founding what is now the nonprofit for youth ages 13-17 to heal from the trauma and abuse caused by alcohol and drug use. They become temporary residents during their healing journey and can also attend school and can earn their GEDs.

After the ceremony's opening prayer, the Healing Lodge youth who are currently enrolled in the programs performed a traditional honor song. Elders from their respective nations broke ground with gold shovels to mark a new chapter for the Healing Lodge's ongoing commitment to center, heal and uplift youth since 1988.

Staff members also attended the event, citing the family wellness center as a new chapter to assess and support the healing process. Katherine Bush and Misty Ruhs serve as counselors in the mental health aftercare programs. With the outpatient services available for family members of the children at the lodge, Bush believes the center's healing rituals can now reach the entire community, creating a safer environment for the at-risk youth.

"It is essential to have us all together in the spirit of healing and for the youth to feel supported everywhere they turn," Bush said. "It should be a 360-view of where they have support, guidance, nurturing and healing."

Danielle Stensgar, a member of the Colville tribe, serves as the lodge's director of behavior health. She described how the family wellness center also cuts into accessibility issues, such as families of the youth being spread throughout the Pacific Northwest, making it difficult to be part of the healing process. The lodge's health experts can now refer or request patient care to other facilities as well.

"Once you do an outpatient clinic, we're not just serving kids, we're serving the community, then everybody can be seen there," she said. "We can talk about medical, any type of mental health or substance abuse, we can bring them all together through our services. It's really support to creating less barriers and more access."

Throughout the ceremony, staff, tribal elders and Spokane community members reflected on the journey and meaning behind the new center, a physical manifestation of the decades of mental and spiritual health work by the lodge. In the ceremony's keynote speech, Andrew Joseph Jr., chairman of the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation and president of the Healing Lodge's board of directors, reflected on the puzzle pieces that helped the center come to life.

"After five years of extended efforts, The Healing Lodge of the Seven Nations and funding with the state of Washington's Department of Commerce to construct a comprehensive Native health center, we could not be more grateful to the DOC for helping our dream come to fruition," he said. "This new family wellness center was made as an unselfish gesture of benefices by the seven nation tribes to the youth, their family and communities that desperately need help to fight and overcome addiction to create a better and healthier future."

Monica Tonasket, who broke ground on behalf of the Spokane tribe as a member and delegate to the board of directors, reflected on her cousin's treatment in 1999. She mentioned the hassle of the back-and-forth visits from the campus to the reservation for

family counseling. She called the ceremony and new center “beautiful” as the community “looks to have a better future for our children.”

“To be able to have (family counseling) opportunity here is good,” Tonasket said. “I’m proud of the work the healing lodge has done and I’m proud to work with the board here.”

The center will be a multipurpose building, housing different aspects of the healing process such as family counseling, music therapy and specialized support service programs.

Raleigh Brown, Eric Mitchell and Terral Lay, the trio who lead the musical program, discussed the importance of expanding the services for the community. For Mitchell, one of the original program founders, the music helps youths return “back to their spirituality.”

“They’re touching base with the roots of who they are after getting lost in the alcohol, drugs and gangs,” said Mitchell, a descendant of the Navajo tribe. “These cultural programs are helping them find their roots and get back to their spirituality.”

Spokane Valley Mayor Pam Haley attended the groundbreaking ceremony, giving thanks to the Healing Lodge’s commitment to healing and supporting at-risk youth.

“I feel privileged that you shared this very special moment with me,” Haley said. “This brings tears to my eyes, because the youth really do need help, and you guys are stepping up and doing it.”

The building is set to be finished by early 2023.
