

# FUNDER PERSPECTIVES



## From a Baseline of Knowing Absolutely Nothing ... to Learning So Much About Supporting Work in Indian Country

By Ren Dietel, Senior Partner, [Dietel & Partners](#)

I began my journey into funding in Indian Country at the request of a client in 2012. They were interested in finding ways to support Native youth leadership initiatives and also were curious about the state of Native languages on reservations in South Dakota.

I didn't know any Indigenous people. I had never been to a reservation. And I knew virtually nothing about the real history of Native people in this country. I was your typical uninformed, white philanthropist raised primarily on a diet of cultural stereotypes and misinformation.

I stumbled onto the [John T. Vucurevich Foundation](#) in Rapid City through a mapping tool at Foundation Center. When I explained to their program officer my total lack of knowledge about Indian Country and that I was just beginning this funding journey, they immediately suggested that I reach out to a group in Montana, [Hopa Mountain](#), that was just about to host its annual gathering of Native-led nonprofits and funders from Montana, Wyoming and North and South Dakota.

Frankly, I was pretty new to philanthropy and I was eager to learn about everything. My sisters and business partners encouraged me to dive in and ask questions. Little did I know that I was embarking on a learning journey for both myself and my client. The suggested gathering, [Strengthening the Circle](#) (STC), happened to be three weeks later in Bozeman, Montana, so I reached out to the organizer, Bonnie Sacchatello-Sawyer, to figure out if it was an appropriate venue for a novice like me.

Bonnie was tremendously welcoming of my questions and concerns about making mistakes in Indian Country, and encouraged me to reach out to Martin Jennings, a Native program officer at the [Northwest Area Foundation](#), before coming to STC for a Native funder's perspective. Looking back, I cringe at that initial call. Like so many before me, I talked about "coming to help" and wanting to make a difference in these poverty-stricken areas. Martin was a straight shooter, and he let me know in no uncertain terms that this "deficit mindset" was not what was needed. He encouraged me to enter into this space looking for the assets in Native communities. Who was doing the work on the ground? How do they define success? How do they use their resources? What do community members identify as areas of need?

I went to the STC gathering that April and my life was dramatically altered. I had the opportunity to sit down and talk face to face with over 30 Native nonprofit leaders from across the High Plains states, who represented a host of issue areas for almost four full days. This deep immersion was the beginning of my personal transformation. I listened and learned that most of my assumptions – such as there being plenty of federal funds and casino dollars available to tribes and Native nonprofits, and that most Native communities and the challenges they faced were pretty similar – were patently false, dead wrong. I realized I had some serious learning to do.

There also were sessions at STC for Indian Country funders to sit and talk candidly about their funding challenges and how to bring more resources to the table. It was a relatively small group of funders my first year, probably only six or seven in total. They ranged from small family foundations that only funded in a single state to a large private foundation that funded across the region. They shared who their grantees were, who else they were considering, and some of the challenges they faced in grantmaking in Indian Country. It made me question why there weren't more funders in attendance and why there wasn't a universal application to make it easier for these overstretched, emerging nonprofits to apply for grant dollars.

Over the years this community of funders has slowly grown. Ours is a learning community and one that welcomes funders from all across the spectrum, from the simply curious to the seriously engaged. We host bimonthly calls and webinars, and offer sessions at annual philanthropy meetings. For me, the most impactful events are the learning tours to reservation communities in different states where funders meet Native leaders and see the work that grassroots groups are doing firsthand. These visits are essential for understanding the vital role these Native nonprofit leaders play in their communities.

No one simply runs a nonprofit. These Native leaders are trusted community problem-solvers. They are resources people turn to when there is an issue and they need help dealing with the situation. Need to redirect kids tagging buildings downtown? Native leaders used cultural lessons on the history of graffiti and engaged acclaimed Native artists and local youth to paint beautiful murals instead. Organic gardens overflowing with fresh produce? Start a Farmers' Market and a café where young people can learn how to run a social enterprise. Now there's an alternative to driving an hour or more off the reservation for healthy food *and* economic opportunities for high schoolers. Youth discovering the physics of bow making or learning their Native language to be able to participate in traditional ceremonies? Combining Indigenous ways of knowing and Western science to enable Native youth to honor their cultural heritage and develop a stronger sense of self-worth.

I won't lie. It did take time and effort as an "outsider" to develop deep and trusted relationships in Indian Country. It was critically important for me to regularly spend time visiting with communities to understand their wealth – a wealth of values and human resources. My frequent trips to see grantees helped me appreciate their traditional knowledge and generosity of spirit, the rich relationships of extended families and the deep connection between people and the land. Visits were opportunities for us to learn and grow together. As I became more open, the power dynamics changed and I realized how important it was to develop deep and authentic relationships. I would get to hear about both their hopes and dreams as well as the everyday challenges. In under resourced areas, very small needs like a broken van or an ailing refrigerator can seriously impact outreach and programming. That's when I would activate resources from a "side-car fund" that the donor used to provide opportunity, emergency and capacity-building grants at my discretion to further amplify the work or increase the efficiency of their existing grantees.

As I became more attuned to the needs within Indian Country, I became a tireless advocate to get my funding colleagues to engage in conversations about this space. Too often it was like talking to a wall. While Native Americans make up 2% of the population, they receive just under .25% of philanthropic dollars. Their numbers are considered too small to have significant impact by most funders, rendering the population invisible and excluded from any serious consideration for most grants. Even if they are considered eligible to apply, the whole grant-application process itself can be overwhelming and resource-intensive for Native nonprofits, especially those with intermittent internet access. We should ask ourselves: How much time and energy should we be expecting any nonprofit to be expending for a single-year grant of \$5,000 when funders really should be providing multi-year grants that cover overhead costs.

How can philanthropy address the barriers and inequalities these Native nonprofits face? There's no dearth of ideas and solutions in Indian Country, or inspired, endlessly hard-working Native nonprofit leaders. There's merely a lack of access to funders and funding dollars. It's the classic Catch-22 situation, funders aren't willing to invest because of perceived instability and risk, but Native nonprofits can't build their capacity and services without access to resources. My client was willing to be the FOOTB funder (first olive out of the bottle). We were often the first funder for grassroots groups and, with additional capacity building training from the STC gatherings, these organizations became more stable and could grow their programming. I would introduce them to my networks and then other funders could meet them and consider funding them, as well.

Mine has been a journey filled with serendipity. I was lucky to meet the right people at just the right time — phenomenal Native leaders with vision and grit that were doing the work on the ground. My client supplied critical general operating and capacity building dollars to grassroots organizations just when they were needed, allowing them to grow and flourish. Had I not listened to Martin's frank comments, I would have entered this space with the wrong headset and made countless harmful and costly mistakes along the way. Had I not been working with a client who was risk-tolerant and willing to go on this learning journey with me, things would have been very different.

But most importantly, I was brought into the circle and I was changed as a result of these partnerships in Indian Country. In practicing true philanthropy, I have learned that I need to invest for the long term, be patient and take risks. My worldview now revolves around the vitality of the family and the community, and protecting the planet for future generations of human and animal life. We have much to learn from the original peoples of this land, if we have the wisdom to be curious, lead with our hearts and become informed.

*Ren Dietel is now a Senior Partner at Dietel & Partners. Ren's work reflects the firm's characteristic approach to grantmaking: helping clients explore how their personal values inform their charitable giving and then expanding their understanding of what is possible with philanthropy. In addition to tailoring the philanthropic experience for each client, she forms close, trusted relationships with changemakers in areas of interest to her clients. In learning their challenges first-hand and supporting their strengths, she can then put her clients' resources to best use. Ren attended Princeton University and graduated from Stanford University, as well as Rockwood Leadership Institute's Art of Leadership for Philanthropic Leaders Program. Ren lives in Seattle with her husband, two children and various four-leggeds, and is actively engaged in a host of local and regional environmental issues in the Northwest.*