

## **Civic Engagement Written Reflection**

### **Addressing Isolation and Digital Self-Sufficiency with First Nations Kitchen**

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Current word count: 1,731

The first idea for this civic engagement project came to be in October of 2020. While serving a Native participant at PCs for People, Ben was struck by the hardship, loss, and isolation that he learned Twin Cities Native communities were experiencing. His participant explained how the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated health issues and economic difficulties for Native people, who often lack the technology skills to connect with family and friends via Facebook, email, or another social platform. The blame for this isolation and lack of technology skills rests upon the shoulders of systemic racism and the economic, social, and geographic disadvantages it has perpetuated in Native communities. After Ben proposed the idea, the civic engagement project entitled “Decreasing Isolation, Nurturing Digital Self-Sufficiency in the Native Community” was created. One goal of this project was to combat this systemic racism by bolstering the digital capabilities of a Native organization; the other goal was to address social isolation in Twin Cities Natives communities during the COVID-19 global pandemic, as that is an experience to which we can all relate.

After a few weeks’ effort to establish relationships with a number of Native organizations in the Twin Cities area, a partnership with the organization First Nations Kitchen (FNK) sprouted in mid-December of 2020. However, once we were in contact with them we weren’t entirely sure where our partnership would lead. They were a ministry based in food security; closing the digital divide was not their primary aim. Still, the isolation caused by the pandemic did concern them, so they were as dedicated as we were to provide some sort of support to the community. We met with the organization’s leadership team composed of Rev. Robert Two Bulls, Ritchie Two Bulls, and Abbie Mitchell in January and quickly assessed how we could best support their digital literacy work and the digital needs of their organization.

A number of projects were proposed, including the creation of a community computer lab at FNK, direct technology support with Native community members, and a website and social media overhaul. Among this myriad of ideas, we and FNK eventually decided on two primary tasks: 1) the reorganization and standardization of their digital filing system and 2) a virtual Pow Wow for Native people living in the Twin Cities. While in the planning stages of the Pow Wow, we were asked if we could assist FNK in organizing data on their Google Drive. They had many files available to both volunteers and employees but never had the opportunity to go through and organize them to be easily navigable and accessible. It was decided that in addition to helping plan the Pow Wow, we would sort, categorize, and reorganize the files in their Google Drive; this project was entitled The Digital Storage Project. It meant a few more meetings with the FNK intern, Abbie, and each member taking time to review the files between their site responsibilities.

The Digital Storage Project’s mission was twofold, first to increase the digital self-sufficiency of First Nations Kitchen staff and second to standardize how data is organized on First Nations Kitchen’s Google Drive storage, thus streamlining the processes of data location and retrieval. To conduct this project, we recorded all 700+ files on FNK’s Google Drive and assigned them categories using a spreadsheet. We created a standard naming system for all files, then renamed and reorganized them into categorized folders. Lastly, a guide was produced for FNK and we facilitated an instruction session on how to use the new storage system at the end of

June. This project increased the efficiency and accuracy with which FNK can store, track, and retrieve data, which helps the organization better manage their resources and serve Twin Cities Native communities.

We simultaneously conducted The Digital Storage Project and planned the Pow Wow. Traditional Pow Wows are events full of dancing, singing, and a shared feast. For almost a year, it had been not safe to put on such an event due to the coronavirus pandemic. Hosting an online Pow Wow would be both beneficial to people feeling isolated, and encourage individuals to use the digital tools they had on hand to connect with one another. If the event was a success, we could empower our community partner to host similar events in the future.

Organizing the Pow Wow began immediately after we started our partnership with FNK. Over the course of five months, we also collaborated with multiple local community leaders, including Barbara Fairbanks and Ricky White, to plan the celebration. Throughout the planning process, the Summer Solstice Community Virtual Pow Wow changed significantly. During a pandemic it is expected that most people are hesitant to make long-term plans. Originally we conceived that a completely virtual event might be the best option for those unvaccinated; at the beginning of our partnership with FNK, the majority of the Minnesota's population did not have access to COVID-19 vaccines. We planned for all festivities to be pre-recorded and broadcasted to people in the comfort and safety of their homes, and the only chance for people to meet in person would be the CTEPs joining staff for Zoom or Crowdcast support. For some, a remote event would be a preferable option, while others would decline to attend outright because it was not in person. As more people in Minnesota were vaccinated and the weather warmed up, we seized the opportunity to remotely broadcast our Pow Wow and facilitate an in-person element for those who felt comfortable. Bob and Ritchie Two Bulls already had a relationship with The Hook and Ladder Theater & Lounge (H&L), a local entertainment venue. With the venue readily available, plans for the hybrid Pow Wow followed soon after.

The greatest stumbling block we faced was low dancer registration leading up to the event. We had sent out flyers, promoted on social media, and contacted dozens of local non-profits that could connect more attendees and dancers. One week before the Pow Wow, we had only one dancer registered. On Crowdcast, our chosen live streaming service, dozens of people had already registered and were prepared to watch a show that had limited entertainment to offer. We had suspected that the majority of our dancers would register late, but this was a bit more extreme than predicted. As the day approached we did away with the registration deadline and hoped for the best.

The event was hosted on the evening of June 24th featuring entirely live dancers and both live and virtual audiences. Two more dancers registered the day before, and a fourth registered on the day of. Even our Crowdcast numbers increased exponentially at the last moment. We had expected around 30 people to attend virtually, but the event ended up reaching over 70 households, with more than three dozen attendees in person, dancing, singing, and gathering. Speaking with dancers at the event, we realized that many of those who performed had not had a chance to do so in a whole year; the dancers were not going to pass up the opportunity to share their culture, their unique personal dance styles, and earn a bit of extra income along the way.

With the support of FNK, H&L, and local Native community leaders, the Pow Wow connected many dozens of Native people in the Twin Cities and reduced their social isolation.

Looking toward the future, the event also empowered the staff at FNK to gain experience in hosting hybrid Pow Wows. By growing skills in organization, outreach, budgeting, and promotion throughout the planning process, staff at the Native organization are eager and able to facilitate equally connective celebrations in the future.

The Summer Solstice Community Virtual Pow Wow was funded by FNK, partially through their budget and partially through a fundraising campaign. We aided FNK in setting up the fundraising campaign website and the community outreach effort that helped supporters of FNK become aware of the fundraiser for the Pow Wow.

We were able to form a great relationship with the FNK staff during our work with them on The Digital Storage Project and the Pow Wow. All three of us plan to maintain that relationship into the future by volunteering at food distributions and providing technology assistance in our own time. FNK came up with many project ideas that we were not able to work on or complete during the few months our partnership lasted, and FNK has indicated interest in forming a long-term relationship with CTEP. FNK would be a great addition to the web of service sites that work with CTEP because they support communities that face many disparities in technology literacy, gainful employment, and access to education. We believe that FNK's mission and goals align with the mission and goals of CTEP, and that they would be a wonderful service site for a future CTEP service member.

We all learned a significant amount about civic engagement from our partnership with FNK. One of the biggest lessons we learned was the importance of patience and flexibility when working with community partners. Often throughout the few months we worked with FNK - especially in the weeks and days leading up to the Pow Wow - we had to quickly pivot and come up with new ways of thinking about our work and what the end product would be. All of that stress and uncertainty was worth the end product, and we are all truly proud of the Pow Wow and the connections we were able to form with community members. We also learned about the impact of resources on small nonprofits' ability to carry out programming goals. For example, money, time, and knowledge were all crucial to the work we were able to do and the success of The Digital Storage Project and the Pow Wow.

The most important thing we learned was how to better support the Native community in the future. We learned how essential it is to educate ourselves about current issues in the community. Throughout the project, we focused on increasing our cultural literacy so that we could be the best support possible for FNK and the Native community. These are lessons that we will continue to use in our careers, and have helped all of us shape our goals for our futures.



Emcee Ricky White, Niigonanakud, waving at the cameras as he prepares to begin the pow wow.



Dancers line up for the Grand Entry to kick off the Summer Solstice Community Virtual Pow Wow.



CTEP members Kristen Hansen, Ben Van Wienen, and Rachel Friedland and FNK intern Abbie Mitchell manage the Pow Wow registration and sign-in table.



The performance space featuring the Host Drum and the emcee, Ricky White, and Robert Two Bulls on the right.



CTEP and FNK staff in “the selfie corner” after the Summer Solstice Community Virtual Pow Wow. From L to R: Abbie Mitchell, Ritchie Two Bulls, Rachel Friedland, Kristen Hansen, Ben Van Wienen, and Robert Two Bulls