



# Opportunity Youth Forum 2023 Fall Convening Report



# Introduction

Hello from the Fresh Tracks team, a part of the family at The Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions. Our mission is clear: to empower young leaders hailing from Indigenous, rural, and urban backgrounds through cross-cultural community capacity-building, leadership development, civic engagement, and transformative trainings. This unique initiative finds its roots in the profound connection between the healing powers of nature and culture.

The inspiration for Fresh Tracks came in 2015 when President Obama called for innovative programs that use the outdoors to broaden horizons for young Americans facing persistent opportunity gaps. It was initially launched as a successful pilot program that saw two cohorts of young adults from Los Angeles and Alaska embark on a shared journey from southern California to the Arctic Circle. Today, Fresh Tracks continues to support and foster youth and community-led initiatives, benefiting over 200 youth movement leaders in 46 communities across 24 states.

In the summer of 2023, Fresh Tracks marked its seventh anniversary and third year as part of the Aspen Forum for Community Solutions. This October at the Opportunity Youth Forum (OYF) Fall Convening, the Fresh Tracks team had time to reflect on the program's growth. The convening centered community, highlighted youth voices, and uplifted well-being. As you walk with us through this report, we invite you to see the vision of Fresh Tracks, witness our growth, and hear the voices of our young leaders, partners, and participating communities.



# Who Can Define Youth and Young Adult Well-being?

The Youth and Young Adult Well-being Project supports the development of innovative well-being and healing measures by youth and young adults (Y/YA) of color that incorporate their lived experiences into a participatory action research process. The Youth and Young Adult Well-being Project is made up of three affinity groups: American Indian/Alaskan Native (AIAN), Latine Bienestar, and Black Expressions of Well-being. Each design team includes youth and young adults (ages 18-25), research allies, adult research navigators, and peer research mentors. These design teams conduct Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) projects that help identify key areas of well-being within and across cultural contexts.

The Financial Well-being Project is a project launched by the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions with support from Prudential. In 2021, this five year initiative was launched with a goal of helping young people experience financial well-being and increasing opportunities for them to build wealth. The project recently launched a community of practice for eight organizations from across the OYF network working with young people to integrate strategies to advance financial capability by helping participants develop financial skills and knowledge and gain access to quality financial products and support systems. This project connects to other Opportunity Youth Forum work around career pathways, entrepreneurship, guaranteed income pilots and cash transfer innovations, all in service of economic thriving as part of the wider vision of holistic well-being.

During this session, young adult researchers from the Youth and Young Adult Well-being Project (Kimberly Pikok, Cierra Gunderson) and an advisor from the Financial Well-being Project (Jocelyn Gama) spoke about their definitions of well-being, the interdisciplinary methods of research they employ, and the importance of youth and young adult researchers from communities of color leading the work.

Moving forward, the Youth and Young Adult Well-being Project will be developing toolkits youth and communities can use to foster and promote Y/YA well-being. Learn more about the Well-being Project [HERE](#) and the Financial Well-being Project [HERE](#).

**“Well-being is like a puzzle, you have a lot of different pieces, and you work on putting it together. Sometimes you try to put pieces together that don’t fit, and it takes time and trying new things to put the picture together.”**

**– Kimberly Pikok**



**“Where are they? The people who have collected the data or come in when there is a specific issue or challenge. Where do they go? Our research is different because I’m Black and I’m the one collecting data and talking to people in my neighborhood.”**

**– Cierra Gunderson**

# Outdoor Equity Network

The Outdoor Equity Network (OEN) is a collaborative endeavor between Native Americans in Philanthropy, Fresh Tracks, and the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions. The Outdoor Equity Network's present goal is to form a coalition that can build a movement for equity, policy, and ultimately systems change rooted in the healing power of outdoors, culture, and Indigenous leadership and practice.

OEN hosted its first planning session of 2023 in Austin, Texas with funders, partners, and organizations to build community and expand the network. Fundamental objectives included increasing understanding of the vision and reaching a consensus on a set of action items. One of the immediate next steps in Q4 of 2023 will be to create and define priorities for a landscape scan of the field of connecting youth to nature.

## **Important themes and priorities emerged from the focus group around key goals:**

- **Centering Indigenous leadership and culture in the pursuit of a more equitable future**
- **Integrating the outdoors into cross-cultural youth organizing experiences, leadership development, and educational programming**
- **Providing partners with the tools to invest in inclusive solutions and challenging them to make racial equity and civic engagement true priorities**



Attendees included representatives from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, The California Endowment, Campfire USA, Corporation for National and Community Service, Hello Insight, LBC Action, National Caucus of Environmental Legislators, Native Americans in Philanthropy, Pisces Foundation, Rally, Resource Legacy Fund, Schmidt Family Foundation, U.S. Department of the Interior, Wilderness Inquiry, The Y BOLD & GOLD, and The Aspen Forum for Community Solutions Fresh Tracks and Opportunity Youth Forum.

# Native, Indigenous, and Tribal Community of Practice

The Native, Indigenous, and Tribal Community of Practice (NIT CoP) is made up of backbone organizations that are members of the Opportunity Youth Forum (OYF) and in partnership with Native Americans in Philanthropy. The Native, Indigenous, and Tribal Community of Practice supports community-driven levers of change at the intersection of the community's need for meaningful knowledge sharing and the capacity to generate positive, culturally relevant outcomes. The Community of Practice is coordinated by the Fresh Tracks team and was created to strengthen collective impact, increase community collaboration, and more widely share learnings.



Eight organizations make up this community of Practice; Wild Rivers Community Foundation (Del Norte & Tribal Lands), The Hopi Foundation (Hopi), Taos Pueblo Division of Health and Community Services (Taos Pueblo), Laguna Community Foundation (Laguna Pueblo), Jemez Department of Education (Jemez Pueblo), Opportunity Youth Action Hawai'i at Kawaioloa (Hawaii), Cheyenne River Youth Project (Lakota), and Hoopa Tribal Education Association (Hoopa).

Members at OYF discussed and shared practices around issues such as Indigenous data sovereignty, philanthropy and available resources, best practices, and requests for support. Each member expressed how important the in-person spaces are to building connection and eventually collective impact between programs and communities.

Dr. Amanda Tachine, Assistant Professor at Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University joined the group to share closing words of encouragement and future opportunities.

# Indigenous Leadership, Opportunity Youth, and Climate Change

There exists a long history of racism and discrimination against Black and Indigenous People of Color in the United States. Despite this history, community leaders have made significant and meaningful contributions to the advancement of this country, climate change resilience, environmental justice, and the lives of young adults and communities of color.

During this interactive session, participants began by spending time building community in nature and sharing both their connections to culture and ways their organizations are approaching equity. This opportunity to learn from other participants about culture while centering Indigenous leadership had a profound impact, exposing stereotypes and promoting learning in a supported and community-centered way. This was amplified by the fact that this was done in nature, contrary to typical workshop and conference culture.

In the session’s closing panel, youth and young adult speakers from Cheyenne River Youth Project (Lakota) shared about the power of place, emphasizing the ability of art to communicate culture and the importance of harnessing community power that centers the most vulnerable community members, including opportunity youth and families.



**“We represent each other, we are interconnected. It’s not one above another, it’s one WITH another.”**

**– Wambli Quintana**



# Belonging, Meaning, Well-being, and Purpose (BMWP) Framework

This fall OYF Convening served as the introduction and announcement of the Belonging, Meaning, Well-being, and Purpose Framework. Introduced and led by Geneva Wiki (Director of BMWP for the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions), several panelists spoke about their expertise, research, and impact on each framework pillar:

- Dr. Amanda Tachine (Assistant Professor, Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University) spoke on her work regarding the pillar of Belonging.
- Arnold Chandler (President & CEO, Forward Change Consulting) spoke of his research and work regarding the pillar of Meaning-making.
- Andrea Wagner (Program Associate, Fresh Tracks at the Aspen Forum for Community Solutions) and Juan Martinez-Pineda (Director, Fresh Tracks at the Aspen Forum for Community Solutions) highlighted the work of the young adult researchers from the Youth and Young Adult Well-being Project, sharing the themes and definition of Well-being developed in Phase One of the project.
- Dr. Anthony Burrow (Ferris Family Associate Professor of Life Course Studies, Director, Purpose and Identity Process Laboratory, Cornell University) spoke on his research and work regarding how people feel a sense of Purpose.

## **Well-being is:**

- **a journey; it is dynamic and ever-changing**
- **about balance, juggling school and work, family and friends, wants and needs**
- **achieving peace amongst various pressures, including financial constraints**
- **trauma-informed; the presence of intergenerational and individual trauma impacts well-being**



# Acknowledgements

Since time immemorial, Native communities across the Americas have demonstrated resilience and resistance in the face of violent efforts to separate them from their land, culture, and each other. Indigenous people remain at the forefront of movements for justice, equity, the protection of nature and the life it sustains. Fresh Tracks is aware that we walk, support, and work on Native land. Native American communities continue to thrive and lead the movements for human rights today. The Fresh Tracks team acknowledges the critical and necessary step to honor Native communities and their leadership to build an equitable future for all. Fresh Tracks encourages all to uncover truths of the original inhabitants of the land we all walk on.

This work is made possible by a collaboration between the The Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions, the Center for Indigenous Health at Johns Hopkins University, the Centers for American Indian and Alaska Native Health at Colorado School of Public Health, CUNY School of Professional Studies Youth Studies Programs, Fresh Tracks, Hello Insight, Intergenerational Change Initiative, LBC Action, National Recreation Foundation, Native Americans in Philanthropy, Network for the Development of Children of African Descent, REI Cooperative Action Fund, Treeline Foundation, The Tides Foundation, Andrus Family Fund, the Schmidt Family Foundation and the leadership of young diverse leaders rooted in community action and the healing power of the outdoors.

