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Subject: Lessons From Tribal Culture: What Gramma Taught Me About Aging Services

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Lessons From Tribal Culture: What Gramma Taught Me About Aging Services

In this blog post Cynthia LaCounte (pictured right), ACL/AOA Director of the Office for American Indian, Alaska Native, & Native Hawaiian Programs, tells a personal story about how her grandmother, a tribal elder of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa in North Dakota, prepared her to work on aging programs.

In November, we observe Native American Heritage Month. We celebrate valuable tribal traditions and commemorate our rich history. Native American citizens have long faced challenges which are unique, and tribal culture has enriched the lives of many in our communities across America. We hope to increase awareness of both, to ensure lessons from the past are preserved across generations, to share the rich gifts of tribal culture with all Americans, and to help people who work with and support Native Americans better navigate our world.

Working in aging services has given me a unique perspective for reflecting on the benefits of the tribal culture I grew up in. Family is integral to our customs, and we particularly celebrate our elders and respect their ideas and points of view. That's just the way it is in Indian Country so I never really thought much about it as a kid. With the benefit of age and experience working in aging services, though, I can see how much stronger we are as a people because of this cultural value.

My grandmother, Tresa (pictured left), was an elder of the Chippewa tribe. I spent lots of time with her in my life because she was always really fun, and I only had her. Everybody in the community called her "Gramma." I could bring all my friends over, and I loved spending the night. I remember at Halloween time, a couple days before, we used to get little bags and you'd put penny candy them. Gramma and I would do that together, and I loved doing that kind of stuff with her. We'd decorate gingerbread cookies. We'd play solitaire. We'd work on puzzles, and she taught me to cook (she was a fantastic cook!). She taught me so many life lessons by letting me work alongside her, and by making the work fun. She was just an amazing, amazing woman.

As Gramma got older, my kids and I moved back home so we could be close. Without thinking about what we were doing, we'd make sure we would take her out for meals. We'd go get her groceries, and take her shopping. We'd help her clean. We'd help her in her garden. And with that bit of help, Gramma was able to continue living the way she wanted to, and my kids were blessed to have many of the experiences I had in childhood and to learn many of the lessons I learned from Gramma when I was their age.

I've always thought that my relationship with Gramma, and my tribal heritage, led me to do what I do now. I learned about supporting older adults, and learned the value of the many ways they support the younger generations, without even realizing what I was learning.

"Taking care of Gramma" grew into a vocation for me, and now I get to spend my days making sure everything we do at ACL considers the unique needs of tribes, and helping tribes take care of our elders with programs like Home-Delivered Nutrition Services, In-Home Services, and Caregiver Respite Services.

[Read LaCounte's full blog post.](#)

[BACK TO TOP](#)

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