

## **Nakia DeMiero, Native Plant Specialist Supervisor and Herbalist**

Interviewee: Nakia DeMiero, Northwest Indian Treatment Center (NWITC)

Interviewer: Amanda Flegel

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Have you ever pondered the health benefits of eating natural foods and practicing food sovereignty, the right of people to have healthy, ecologically sustainable foods that are culturally appropriate? Most of us tend to think of physical health benefits. We think of hard-working gardeners and professional farmers. Many of us also know we get lots of vitamins and minerals from eating fresh organic foods. Yet we often overlook all the mental and emotional health benefits eating real food brings. Nakia DeMiero, a descendant of the Santa Clara and Isleta Pueblos tribes in New Mexico, works as a Native Plant Specialist Supervisor and Herbalist at Northwest Indian Treatment Center in Elma WA. She can attest firsthand to the healing powers of working with plants and herbs, whether gardening or gathering medicines in the forest. When describing her connection with plants and herbs, she said:

I grew up with my dad in a garden: I always remembered him gardening; I have always had a deep connection to plants, house plants, or decorative flowers. So, when the opportunity came here for me, I picked up the shovel and became one with it. I knew that I and the shovel had to have a great relationship, that I needed to enjoy my time with that shovel because I would be using it often. I enjoy it. Gardening takes some hard work, but the reward makes up for it. Now I am addicted to how it makes me feel as a person and that I am able to give back. It gives me purpose in helping others, helping others heal. To give something that is going to feed other people that provides for me. By giving back, that feeds me. There is a lot of reciprocity that I get with the garden. That hard work I give into the garden gets back to me. I am able to share all those gifts with other people.

Nakia practices what she preaches by sharing the healing power plants have provided her clients daily. She works with clients at a time in their life when they are seeking healing from substance abuse at NWITC. NWITC is a residential alcohol and drug treatment facility serving a primarily Native American population from Washington, Oregon, and Idaho. I had the pleasure of meeting with Nakia for an interview (via zoom). She discussed the work and rewards that gardening and natural medicine brings to her client's recovery. "I get to see them blossom into who they are, who they're meant to be. They are kind, and they show empathy for what we are doing and compassion. They will sweat out there, right along with me. They're usually always bugging me, asking when we are getting out in the garden, and can we help."

Nakia teaches many lessons of self-care and coping skills in the garden at NWITC. When describing the connections made in the garden around subjects such as self-care and community care, she explained:

We use organic soil; we don't cuss in our garden, don't smoke in our garden, and don't have bad thoughts. If you step on part of a plant, you apologize to it. They are spoiled and well taken care of plants. But it is what we do. That also teaches patients that are learning how to take care of themselves, how to take care of other things. The going thing in recovery is, don't get in a relationship early in recovery. If you can take care of a plant for a year, then you get an animal. Take care of the animal for a year, then maybe you might be ready for a relationship. We are having those conversations out there, and they are important. Tying into what our ancestors did and discussing this is what we need to go back to doing. This is how we can take care of ourselves and our community better, how we can be resilient, especially in such challenging times. Whether it is dealing with life in early recovery or just dealing with life in an epidemic. It is learning how to be resilient and being self-sufficient and self-sustaining.



The traditional foods and berries cover a 22 by 50 foot area. The medicine wheel is 50 feet in radius.

I have seen the patients out there in the garden helping others. They understand that they are giving back to the subsequent patients coming; there's purpose in that; that is when I get to see them become who they are supposed to be: Indigenous people help other people, it is part of who we are and our culture. We are stewards of many things, including Mother Earth, most importantly. It is important to reconnect. When we reconnect with the earth, I feel like we become more awake, and we become more present in life; we become more mindful.

Nakia continued to speak proudly of her client's growth:

I noticed them yesterday asking for a weed puller and a bucket because they were pulling weeds by the outside area where the men gather. And I did not even ask them to do that. They see somebody taking care of an area and having pride in it, and I feel like that is what they are doing with their areas. It rejuvenates them. I have had patients showing me pictures of their garden plans. Or ask what plans I should start off planting in a garden? So, I have handouts for them like, *Top 10 Must-Haves* in your garden.

We talk about it when we are out there; those are the kind of conversations that we are having. We are having those conversations about how important it is to grow gardens, what it does to the bees, and how important the bees are for us. There is also a conversation about when they go home. Sometimes for us in recovery, idle hands can be deadly. It is about going back home and uplifting their tribal communities. Most tribes have a community garden; if you have free time, uplift your community by volunteering. Most of them are probably looking for help in those gardens. It could be an employment opportunity. It is a way to continue the work that they have started here. I have explained to them that sometimes I must get my hands in the dirt. When I am stressed out and have a lot going on or a lot on my plate, the last thing I want to do is sit in front of the computer. I want to go out there, get dirty, sweat, find my center and balance being with nature. You can be present at that moment. You are not worrying about everything you need to do; you can be there with the plants, with the dirt getting dirty. You get to feed that inner child by doing that.

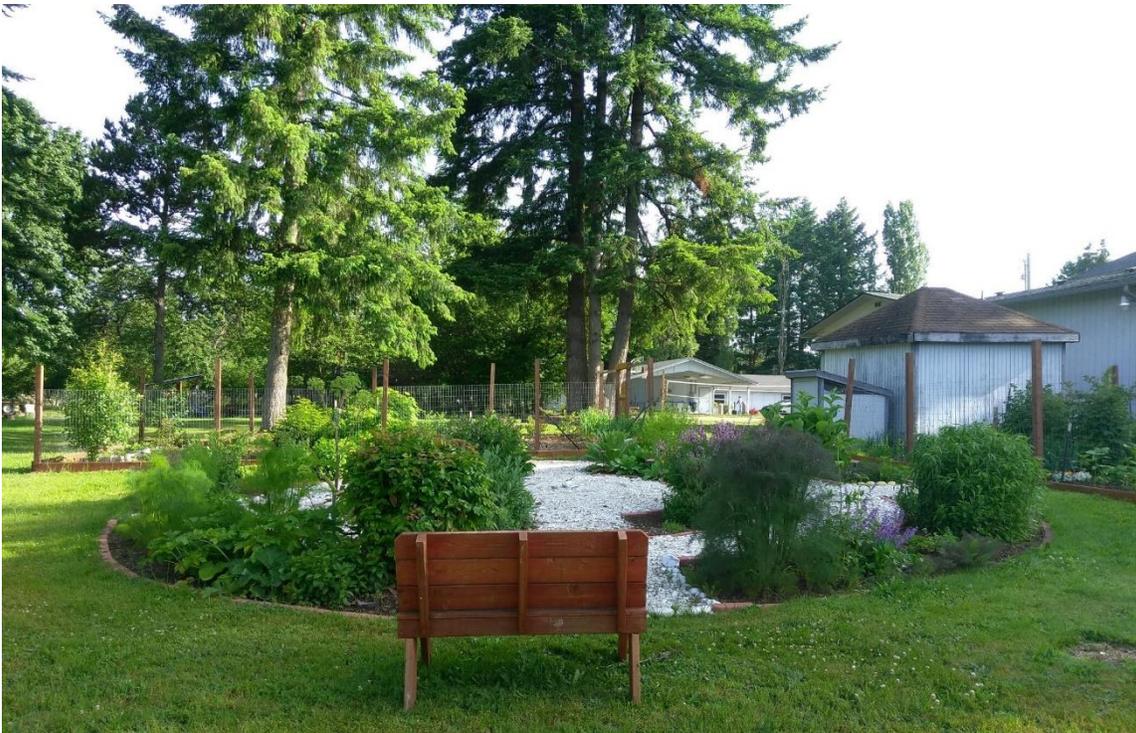
Nakia also feels strongly that food sovereignty helps to foster cultural connections for Native Americans. Nakia concludes "Food sovereignty is about freedom of native foods; being able to provide for yourself and be sustainable, that's important. Our ancestors were many things; they were hunters, fishermen, medicine makers, and farmers. I always like to add that part there." Some Native Americans equate farming with colonialism. She works to educate her clients that Native Americans were many things, even farmers, before colonization. She continued: "They didn't have grocery stores; they lived off of what was in season, they paid attention to what was going on in the forest. I feel we are in a time right now where people are becoming more self-sustaining."

We discussed colonization and its effects on Native American food sovereignty. Nakia notes: Generational trauma goes way back; it goes back to when the Europeans first landed and started pushing us off our lands." She described the importance food plays in healing these traumas: Providing healthy food and making sure that you have your traditional food there is essential because that is what feeds us. That is what sustains us. I just watched the documentary *Gather*; they said that a bad fishing season means a rise in addiction, mental health issues, and suicide rates go up. There is a lot that goes into just one bad fishing season; most people are not even really thinking about it. Those native foods that feed us, those feed our spirit. Food sovereignty is essential; it is not just about our health but the earth's health also. We are fighting for our rights to those native foods. Whether it be fish, you name it; it is been a constant battle and a constant fight. There are layers; we have what is happening in the environment. We have global warming, affecting the fish. Not only do we have to fight for the

food, but we also must fight for this bigger reason. We fight what is keeping us from eating those foods by preserving habitats. It is essential, just as indispensable as the food!

When asked if the garden is vital to the center, Nakia explained that “the garden is just as much part of the center as the counseling is. It is the foundation; the cultural piece tying it together. It is weaving that culture into the treatment. The staff all feel like you can't have one and not the other. It is about what works for indigenous people, and this is what works for indigenous people. Connecting the land to their spirit, and to the skills that they are learning. It is just important to tie it all together.”

Nakia's work is teaching them new skills that help them live better. They are being refreshed through learning not just sustainable gardening and farming practices but sustainable life skills as well.



Medicine Wheel