

## Strength in Action: Supporting Our Nation's Most Vulnerable Youth Podcast Series

### **Episode: Respecting and Honoring Tribal Youth**

[John Bollenbacher:] Welcome to Strength in Action: Supporting Our Nation's Most Vulnerable Youth, a podcast series by the Family and Youth Services Bureau within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. This series is produced by FYSB's Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Program, as part of The Exchange.

I'm John Bollenbacher, a producer for The Exchange. Here in the podcast we talk with people implementing programs that prevent teen pregnancy and help prepare teens for adulthood. While overall teen birth rates are decreasing, we're not done yet. Teen births remain high among vulnerable youth.

Today we're joined by Annie Nowak, and Annie, can you tell you can you tell us a little bit about the work you doing?

[Annie Nowak:] My name is Annie Nowak, and I'm here with the Poarch Band of Creek Indians. I'm Prevention Coordinator with the Tribe. We work with both tribal youth, and with youth in the community. Our reservation is a little bit different, because we are in Poarch, however, we understand that our tribal youth have so much interaction with youth in the community, that we want to make sure everybody's on the same page as far as protection. And the training that we give, really, our youth, we wanted to be available to the community as well.

[John Bollenbacher:] Right, because it's important for everybody, isn't it?

[Annie Nowak:] Well, it is important for everybody. It absolutely is, and so the fact that our tribal youth are interacting so much with youth in the community, the superintendent of schools has allowed us to go into the public schools, and that's wonderful, because we have such open access that now we're able to reach the kids starting in the elementary school and work with them, all the way up through the middle schools and then into the high school.

[John Bollenbacher:] And that makes sense, because it's not as if the Poarch Band of Creek Indian youth aren't going to come in contact with the everyone else in society, so you can do as much education as you want with them...

[Annie Nowak:] Exactly, and we also understand that just educating our youth will only go so far, because there are outside influences, and they are constantly interacting with other youth in the community, other youth, really, across the country, because our tribe right now is experiencing a time of prosperity. So our youth are going away to college, our youth are going away on lots of trips, lots of travel that they're able to participate in. So, we want to make sure that they're as well-equipped to enter the world as we can possibly make them.

[John Bollenbacher:] I know that, especially within FYSB, there is a big emphasis on working with tribal youth. Can you talk to us a little bit about what is unique about working with that population?

[Annie Nowak:] The situations with tribal youth, we're learning, are the situations with other youth out in the community. Tribal youth, we found that as far as with the adulthood preparation topics, healthy relationships, is a big part of what we focus on, because many healthy relationships have not been modeled in the community, and we're learning that so much of the dysfunction that we see on the reservation is generational. We want to let the kids know that there is a different way to live, that you can make different choices, and you are the captain of your life. So we want you to make choices that will empower you, that will keep the future open for you, that will allow you to move forward in the way that you choose to move forward.

[John Bollenbacher:] Right, so, we definitely have a focus on vulnerable youth, but I think sometimes when people thinking about vulnerable youth, they're not necessarily thinking about tribal youth, just because it's not on the top of their head. But, hearing what I'm hearing you say about their history and all those things, these are probably some of the most vulnerable youth we have.

[Annie Nowak:] Right, well, we've learned a lot about historical trauma, and how that has affected generations of tribal youth, and the fact that families have been broken up. With tribal youth, it is a matter of understanding what they've experienced in the past that has formed a lot of their mindsets, and understanding how we can present information that will facilitate change for those youth.

[John Bollenbacher:] And there also must be some pretty serious cultural tensions, right?

[Annie Nowak:] I am a guest on the reservation. Basically, what I can bring forward for the youth to learn from is kind of my value as a guest. The youth that we work with, I think are very open to outsiders coming in, and having that interaction and understanding that the only reason that we're there is for their benefit. But, also, knowing that there is some skepticism, or some reservation, I think, by some of the elders, that, "Oh, this person is not a tribal member" and explaining to them why we're there—that we are there for the growth and continuation and prosperity of the tribe, that that is our interest.

[John Bollenbacher:] Mm-hmm, and I know you mentioned earlier about finding unique ways to present this information so tribal youth will act on it. Can you give us some more specifics about how you're dealing with this information, how you are presenting it, that the youth really respond to it?

[Annie Nowak:] I think mostly, understanding where the youth are, where they're coming from, is a big part of it, and for them to understand that we in no way have judgment over the choices that they are making, and that their lifestyle and their choices are just that, and we are only here to provide information and to guide those choices, not tell you what is right and wrong. There is a strong religious presence on the reservation, and when we first came in and started with the teen pregnancy prevention program, there was a lot of concern when the word "prevention" was used, and people thought, "Oh, okay, they're going to be talking about abortion," and that's not what we're interested in talking about at all. You know, it's more informing youth about how they can protect themselves, and empower themselves to make the best decisions. And we know from the research that's out there, there was the big concern was the fact that, "Oh, if you talk to kids about sex, it's going to make them want to have sex," when in reality, we know exactly the opposite is true. That if you demystify the whole sexual thing and body parts and feelings, and allow them to have open conversations about these adult topics, that they're still kids and they still understand it and come at it from a youthful point of view. But if you open it up to those discussions, and those conversations, there is so much appreciation from them, and once they understand what's behind this veil of mystery, they are so much more less likely to participate in

risky behaviors. A part of the adulthood preparation topics that we cover with them, is also about feeling good about themselves. And don't let other people convince you or try to talk you into doing things that *they* want you to do, that you are not ready to do. So, it kind of all works in together that what we're doing is really just providing the youth with information. We're arming them with the resources that they can use to make the best choices.

[John Bollenbacher:] And, I know that different cultures, and sometimes different religions, treat sexual behavior very differently, and I'm wondering if you can speak a little bit about, maybe, what is a unique challenge, or do you have any hurdles when it comes to the Native American community, and talking about sexual behavior?

[Annie Nowak:] I think probably the biggest thing has just been opening the conversation of sexual behavior. We have the religious presence that's most prolific in our community, would be Pentecostal, and so there's strong Biblical references, and strong feelings about homosexuality, sexual behaviors, and just really opening up those doors to conversation, I think, has been the best thing that we've been able to do, both for tribal youth and for youth in the community. And, what we hear when we're in, say, in the middle school, where tribal youth attend the middle school, and what we hear is that kids say, "I could never have these conversations with my parents," "I could never have these conversations with my grandmother," or whoever my caregiver is. Just allowing them to ask questions, you know, and to use the terminology that they're comfortable with. You know, they'll throw out all different kinds of slang terms, and we always use the medically correct term, but just answering these questions, you know, "What is up with that?" And, they are so thankful.

[John Bollenbacher:] And I know that you're working within multiple communities, and I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about any differences you see in trying to get tribal youth involved and come to meetings as opposed to other communities.

[Annie Nowak:] Well, it's really, we found that it's really difficult trying to schedule meetings on the reservation just for this topic. So what we've done is we've gone and worked with situations where youth are already gathered. We've worked with—there's a summer leadership program, and so, we go in where the youth are actually coming, and they are paid to attend this program. So, they are provided with many educational opportunities as well as fun experiences that they can have as youth together, and so we scheduled time during that session. There's two different sessions in the summer. So we spend time with the youth there, and we cover different topics. And we also work with the Boys and Girls Club that has a very strong presence on our reservation, and we work with them and go in and work with the teenagers on different topics. But, trying to get them to come together just for teen pregnancy prevention proved very difficult, and we learned that through the very first year of the grant in trying to schedule those meetings and schedule times when we can get that information to the youth. We've also have been very lucky that we— the schools have been opened up to us, because we can take actually school time where the superintendent has said, "Okay, you know, you guys can come in and work with the youth."

[John Bollenbacher:] Right. So, it's interesting, because you brought up the topic of these adult preparation skills, and I think from some, for some people from the outside, when they think of adolescent pregnancy prevention, they just think of sex ed, but it goes way beyond that. Can you talk about some of the things that you folks are doing that isn't just about sex?

[Annie Nowak:] Sure. We talk about healthy relationships, not only how you should treat other people, but how you should allow other people to treat you. We talk about effective communication with your peers, but also with your parents. We talk about effective communication with your teachers. We talk about, you know, even during our teen pregnancy prevention component, we always bring up, you know, talk to your parents. Ask your parents these questions. Because we know that the data shows us that still the most influential people in a child's life are the parents. So, we encourage them to open up that conversation, with your parents. We also reinforce the fact of how difficult the conversation this is to have with your parents, or your guardian, so *you* open it up. We know that your parents want to talk to you about these things. But, they're a little timid about these conversations, but you can assist them with that.

[John Bollenbacher:] And outside of healthy communication, are there any other topics that you guys have covered, like financial literacy or career goals?

[Annie Nowak:] We work a lot with HRM videos, Human Relation Media, and they have programs on after high school, and there's a DVD on choices after high school for students that have difficulty. You know, college is not for everybody, and we know that. So it talks about technical schools, it talks about even colleges for youth that have learning disabilities, to let them know that it doesn't have to stop here, there are other alternatives for you, you can move on. We work with the kids on substance abuse, because substance abuse ties in with pregnancy prevention, because we know that if you're out there getting high or drinking, you're skipping school, so truancy is an issue, and also you are participating in risky sexual behaviors. So, we really incorporate all of that in. And the fact that so many of the youth that we work with have experienced issues and have seen the effects of drugs and alcohol on family members, on friends. You know, so many of the youth that we work with have family members that are in jail or in prison. And we talk about those behaviors and alternatives to those behaviors. So really, all of the adulthood preparation topics are worked into the program. Financial literacy we cover and talk about just making wise financial choices. When you never learned how to handle money, the financial choices that you make are very different than if you are educated on how to handle your money. So, that's also something that's really important that we work with the youth on. You know, as I mentioned, bringing in another person from the Education Department to work with the youth on that.

[John Bollenbacher:] And I know you touched on it before, but can you speak a little bit more about why you think all these other adult preparation skills are important for driving down teen pregnancy?

[Annie Nowak:] Well, because it's life. You know, life doesn't come to us just in a bubble, where pregnancy prevention is just one thing, because sexual behaviors are based on so many of the other things going on in their lives. So, you know, say they have a fight at home with their parents, and they want to run out and go with their friends, and they're stressed out, and their friend says, "Oh here, smoke this joint, it'll make you feel better, you'll relax." And then we know, okay, smoking that joint is, you know, especially if it's a male friend, may lead to risky sexual behaviors. So, it teaches them how to deal with not just sexual choices, but overall life choices. We want a healthy person. We don't want just a healthy sexually active person or sexually abstinent person, we want an all-around healthy tribal member that is going to be educated about all of these different facets that will affect their lives. We just try to get in as much education as we can to positively influence our youth, you know. And part of positively influencing our youth is also just being available, being present for them. "Come in and talk to us," you know, "We know that you're experiencing stressors in your lives—*please*, come and talk to us."

We also touch on, even, suicide prevention, because with youth that are questioning their sexuality, we know that that's a real issue as well, and with the strong religious influence in our community, we want them to understand that they can come and talk to somebody about the thoughts that they're having, about the issues that they're facing. We never want them to feel alone or isolated.

[John Bollenbacher:] So, you work in a field where there's a lot of people working on adolescent pregnancy prevention, in a lot of different ways, but in some ways you are unique because there's a much smaller population with folks that are working with tribal youth. Can you talk a little bit about what might be different about working with this population, than all the rest of the folks who do other kinds of teenage pregnancy prevention have to deal with?

[Annie Nowak:] Tribal youth are, in some respects, having to regain that sense of being proud of their heritage, especially in the area that we live in, is that they are reclaiming a lot of the Poarch Creek Indian culture, because a lot of it was lost. We've got youth that are working to reclaim the language, reclaim a lot of the cultural activities that took place. And so, coming to a place where you understand that that's what's going on, and you respect that that's what's going on, and you honor that that's what's happening. I think that all of those things help us in this goal of growing healthy, happy, successful tribal youth.

[John Bollenbacher:] Well Annie, I want to thank you for taking the time out and talking with us and giving us this great information, and I want to thank our audience for listening to this Family and Youth Services broadcast. Please check out all of our other videos and podcasts on our website.

Thank you for tuning in. As you heard, our work isn't done and it will take more leaders like Annie Nowak to prep teens for the future.

Be encouraged, and get connected, at the exchange. Go to [teenpregnancy.acf.hhs.gov](https://teenpregnancy.acf.hhs.gov).

This podcast series is produced by the Family and Youth Services Bureau within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. FYSB is committed to a future in which all our nation's youth, individuals, and families can live healthy, productive, and violence-free lives.