



Deep-Rooted Knowledge

Generations of Traditional Medicine

Story by Sydney Akridge, Photos by Hunter Wiggins

heryl Morales started the medicinal garden at the Aaniiih Nakoda College's demonstration farm in 2010 with only four

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plants: yarrow, echinacea, plantain and liquorice root. After 10 years, the garden has expanded to hold more than 60 plants.

The six raised garden beds, a garden wheel and a greenhouse make up almost 30,000 square feet.

Almost all of her plants also grow naturally in the mountains, valleys and river banks on the Fort Belknap reservation in Northern Montana. The plants have also been used for generations as medicines to treat a wide variety of symptoms: Echinacea is used to help boost the immune system, protecting healthy cells; Valerian is a strong sedative that can address nervousness, tension and stress; Liquorice root is an antihistamine, which treats allergy symptoms.

Morales continues to add new plants to the garden every year, testing them out, paying close attention to them and observing how they grow. This year, she is testing Oregon grape root and bread root.

If she had the capacity for all of the medicinal plants she could use in the garden, it would look like a pharmacy. There are so many medicinal plants that can be used if people know how to harvest and process them. This is knowledge that people used to have, Morales said.

“Our ancestors. Did they know they were scientists? No. They were just taking care of their body, taking care of their people,” Morales said. “All this knowledge, they knew it. They handed it down, and for years and centuries, we took it for granted. And here we are trying to teach ourselves, trying to learn.”

Starting in the 1800s, federal policies helped wipe out a significant amount of traditional Indigenous knowledge. Just like Morales, now in her 60s, many

people in the Fort Belknap community are working to teach themselves and others the traditional and cultural knowledge that was lost.

YARROW



Latin Name
Achillea
millefolium

Range
Grasslands,
meadows, and
rangelands across
Montana

Uses
Used to treat the
symptoms of a host of
different illnesses.
Contains chemical
structures that have
potential
anti-inflammatory
properties.

Source: www.fieldguide.mt.gov & www.botanical.com

Not only have tribes managed to maintain traditional Indigenous knowledge

throughout history, but it even appears that the federal government has come around to seeing the value of tribal healthcare methods.

In 2019, the Indian Health Service hospital, a federally funded and treaty-promised service, at Fort Belknap put out a call for applicants for two traditional practitioner positions, offering up to \$68,000 a year.

The move is surprising because the federal government would essentially be paying for a medicine man or woman to help treat IHS patients. This is the first IHS position of its kind in Montana.

The two traditional healers would be filling many roles: Providing education to the community and staff at the hospital about traditional health practices; acting as a resource to connect patients with people in the community with more specific knowledge; and using traditional native diagnostic and treatment procedures like ceremonies, blessings and sweats.

“As an advocate and liaison between patients and providers, their work will enhance communication and understanding of the culture and lifeways of the local community,” according to Marshall Cohen, a public affairs representative for IHS.

The people filling these positions would help IHS take a holistic and comprehensive approach to care including physical, mental, emotional and spiritual needs, Cohen said in an email message.

The traditional practitioners would also “provide training to service unit staff on Native healing practices and traditional beliefs to enable Fort Belknap IHS staff to provide health services with cultural sensitivity and competence,” according to the job description.

IHS has yet to fill either position, despite being posted since late 2019.

However, the job announcement itself is causing ripples in other parts of the state.

D'Shane Barnett, the executive director of the Missoula Urban Indian Health Center, which in May changed its name to the All Nations Health Center, said he was able to use the Fort Belknap job listing to create a similar position. The center created a job description for a part-time traditional healer in late March. The All Nations Health Center receives funding from IHS but is run independently in Missoula.

In the past, the Missoula center was only able to bring on a traditional healer on a contract basis and only when there was extra room in the budget. Now, the same traditional healer the Missoula Urban Indian Health Center will be available for programming and counseling year-round.

A traditional healer at an IHS hospital or an urban Indian health center clinic would be able to work with some illnesses or problems that impact the community in a way that western-based clinicians might not, Barnett said. He believes diseases like diabetes and heart disease as well as problems like domestic violence require lifestyle changes rather than a clinical solution.

“The doctors are not going to be able to give someone one shot that will be able to cure diabetes or one shot that is going to cure heart disease,” Barnett said. “What we would hope is that having them [traditional practitioners] in that role, is that we can start to see a dent in some of the most prevalent conditions that actually impact life and death in our community.”

These new traditional healer positions are surprising because the United States, in particular the federal government has a deeply conflicted history with tribal traditional practices.

In 1883, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs set up the Courts of Indian

Offenses on reservations across the country. The office regularly issued rules prohibiting religious dances including the Sun Dance, ceremonies and practices of medicine men until 1921 and continued to enforce them through the 1960s and 1970s.

In Fort Belknap, many medicine people and spiritual leaders were forced underground to avoid punishment, and many families chose not to teach traditional knowledge to their children. Materials used for religious ceremonies were confiscated and people were taken to jail and sometimes killed when they were found taking part in any of the activities the commissioner's office deemed illegal.

It wasn't until the American Indian Religious Freedom Act in 1978 that the federal government acknowledged the right of American Indian tribes to practice their religions, speak their languages, visit their sacred sites and use their traditional health practices. This took a toll on knowledge that had been passed down for generations for the Assiniboine and Gros Ventre tribes at Fort Belknap.

Still, even though the federal government attempted to discredit and outlaw traditional medical practices, the Fort Belknap tribes have fought hard to hold on to that knowledge, teaching these lessons through family generations.

"For over 180 years, they've been trying to blend us in the melting pot of America and make citizens out of us, but we have held on to our own culture, and we have our own identity," said John Allen, an Assiniboine spiritual leader.

Because there were many Assiniboine tribes in Canada, the Fort Belknap tribe was able to bring the Sun Dance ceremony to Canada to be kept safe in the 1920's. When the American Indian Religious Freedom Act was passed, a council from Fort Belknap brought back the Sun Dance ceremony from Canada, according to Minerva Allen, John Allen's mother.

The Assiniboine tribe at Fort Belknap had taken part in the Sun Dance for hundreds of years before the U.S. government prohibited it. The Sun Dance lodge takes about six months to prepare, and by the summer solstice in July, spiritual leaders and people seeking healing for themselves or others participate in the ceremony.

At one time, there would have been multiple Sun Dances a year, but today there is usually only one. John Allen has built about 30 Sun Dance lodges in his lifetime, the primary structure that is the centerpiece of the multi-day ceremony, he said.

Allen has treated people with physical, mental and spiritual ailments for over 30 years. For the Assiniboine people at Fort Belknap, medicine people have been an important part of the community. Today, he estimated about 25% of the people living on the reservation continue to use traditional spiritual and health practices.

Each medicine person or spiritual leader has specific knowledge. At one point there would have been around 15 spiritual leaders or medicine people at Fort Belknap, Minerva Allen said. Today, there are four medicine people at Fort Belknap; three are Gros Ventre spiritual leaders and John Allen said he is the only Assiniboine spiritual leader.



Since many tribes have resorted to passing on traditional healing practices via word-of-mouth, there is no regulating administration. Credentialing such positions could take a level of grassroots networking.

For the IHS positions, for instance, qualifications would be determined by paid and unpaid experience, including the knowledge of traditional healing ceremonies, advising patients to seek out other native practitioners and developing treatment plans and providing education on traditional health, according to the Fort Belknap IHS job listing.

It can be difficult to vet for traditional health practitioners because it is not a certified or licensed position, Barnett said. At the All Nations Health Center, when he is looking for a traditional healer, he starts by talking to the tribe they are from.

“For example, if they say they are Blackfeet, we will check with the Blackfeet nation to make sure that they don’t have anything to say about them not being able or trained,” he said. He also uses word-of-mouth, speaking with people they worked with in the past or people that know them, to see if they are legitimate.

Because traditional healers were forced to go underground in the past, and the community is very protective over traditional health knowledge, it can be difficult to determine the qualifications of traditional healers. This also means learning traditional Indigenous knowledge can be difficult.

Growing up, Morales knew her family had a history of using medicinal plants. Her great grandmother Melvina Horn was a well-known Assiniboine plant person, but Morales’ grandparents were afraid the government would punish their children for learning about cultural and religious traditions or using traditional medicine.

The plants harvested from the medicinal garden are primarily used for the traditional plants class and the college’s demonstration farm garden tours in September. Morales also uses the medicine for herself and community members who go to her with questions.

In the last 10 years, as the medicinal garden and traditional plants class has been more widely known in the community, more people come to Morales for help. She said recently she has had at least one person a day ask her about specific plants that can help treat them.

Morales uses combinations of herbs in teas and creams for many ailments such as colds, allergies, skin irritations and joint pain. For allergies, she uses a tea with a combination of herbs like liquorice root, lemon balm and feverfew. She makes a cream for skin irritations with a combination of calendula, yarrow and

echinacea to clean, repair and protect the skin tissue. If she has a cold, she will make tea with hyssop, peppermint, marshmallow root and yarrow because they clear out the breathing passages and boost the immune system.

She and her husband are drinking tea with elderberries to boost the immune system during the COVID-19 pandemic. She is also testing combinations to help with anxiety and stress with plants like lemon balm, hops, lavender, rosemary and skull cap.

Morales spends every day in the garden during the summer months weeding the beds until the plants are ready to harvest. Most of the plants start to sprout by May, and she harvests them through the end of the summer.

Utilizing the empty classrooms and the hallway next to her office at the college, she leaves them to dry for a couple weeks before she can process them by crushing them up and placing them in mason jars. Morales makes sure she has enough of the harvested plants to last through the next year because she can only harvest during the summer, and she doesn't know what people will need.

By the time Morales knew her great grandmother, Horn was in her 90s and did not speak much. Morales would visit Horn almost daily, but she said she was never able to learn directly from her about medicinal plants. She remembered one of her aunts told her about peppermint. When she was younger, Morales's aunt would go with her mother to Horn's house when she was sick with a cold, and Horn would go out and pick some peppermint to make tea for her.

This was the extent of Morales' medicinal plant knowledge before she attended a National Science Foundation presentation in 2009 in Washington D.C. Linda Black Elk, an ethnobotanist, spoke about the uses of medicinal plants that grow naturally in the Dakotas. The plants could help with ailments like colds and rashes. Morales found that many of these plants also grew in Montana.

“I was very impressed with the plants that she talked about, how they were used, and I wanted to learn more, and more, and more,” Morales said.

When Morales was looking for more information about traditional plants after the National Science Foundation presentation, she used books and YouTube videos, but she also reached out to ethnobotany instructors and elders.

She took a four-day course at the Blackfeet Community College in Browning, Montana with Wilbert Fish. The class spent time mostly outside of the classroom learning to identify, collect and use plants near Browning. Morales also brought the National Science Foundation presenter Linda Black Elk to the Aaniiih Nakoda College to teach a four-week course.

The only elder in the Fort Belknap community Morales was able to learn from was Minerva Allen. “There weren’t a lot of elders that I reached out to who knew medicines,” Morales said. “They just didn’t utilize them anymore because of western medicine.”

Allen was born in Big Warm near Lodge Pole on the Fort Belknap reservation. As the oldest granddaughter, she was raised by her grandparents. Her grandmother was a plant person, and she would take Allen out and show her the medicinal plants and the poisonous plants.

“Minerva, she grew up at her grandmother’s hip, picking up plants, and her grandmother was teaching her this,” Morales said about Allen. “When Minerva had her own kids, she was going out with them, and they were very fortunate, very fortunate to learn first-hand.”

Allen recently retired, but she is continuing to share her knowledge with the Fort Belknap community. She has a background in education, teaching in the Hays-Lodge Pole schools, directing the Head Start program in Fort Belknap and working with programs at the Aaniiih Nakoda College. Today, she continues to

share her expertise in the Assiniboine language and traditional plants, heading the Lodge Pole Senior Center and writing grant proposals for the nursing program at the college.

IHS in Fort Belknap has posted ads seeking to fill the traditional practitioner positions twice. The position remains unfilled. John Allen said he considered applying for the traditional healer position, but he thought that working full time for IHS would put a time constraint on his other duties as a spiritual leader, like treating people who aren't going to the hospital.

Morales has taught the traditional plants class as a full semester course since the spring of 2010. The semester-long course reaches both Native American Studies and Allied Health associate degrees' curriculums. She said the class helps her students learn the traditional and cultural ways their people used the plants— some of the culture the two tribes lost. Morales said that class also gives her students a more comprehensive understanding of plants.



“It helps them to understand their people, how they used it, what they used it for and gives them a better understanding of who they are,” Morales said.

“Medicine, plants, it’s part of us. So they can actually grasp that and bring it back.”

During the semester, Morales teaches the class about medicinal plants that grow naturally in the Fort Belknap area and the medicines that can be made from them. Morales pulls out the dried plants prepared during the previous summer for the students and after she teaches them what each one is used for, she lets them take home as much as they want to make tea.

One year a student brought home a lot of teas for her grandfather who lived at home. She told Morales as soon as she made him some tea, he started to tell her stories about plants and his family.

“Just having that medicinal tea from plants just woke him up, just brought memories flooding back and she was really happy. She hadn’t seen her grandfather so excited about something,” Morales said. “And this was over a cup of tea.”