

## WHOLENESS THROUGH SERVICE

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Andrew Johnson and Peggy Johnson, Turtle Mountain Community College

### BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

The *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* defines *crisis* as “a sudden change in the course of an acute disease, either toward improvement or deterioration” (1971, 314). Over one thousand residents of the Turtle Mountain Indian Reservation now seek treatment for diabetes at the IHS health care system in Belcourt, North Dakota, and the number of known diabetics on the reservation exceeds 2000. The tribe is concerned about the number of undiagnosed individuals who may be ravaged over time by this disease, as some experts believe the typical diabetic has the disease for five to seven years before it is diagnosed. Turtle Mountain Community College (TMCC) is making an effort to provide service to a community critically impacted by a disease which has entered reservation communities in epidemic proportions. At one time, Type II diabetes was thought to be a disease that afflicted middle-aged individuals and the elderly, but reservations across America have learned to their sorrow that the threat is far more widespread. For example, “Nearly 16% of American Indians ages 20 years and older who are receiving care from Indian Health Services (IHS) have diabetes” (Turtle Mountain Diabetes Program ).

Many of the instructors at TMCC have integrated service learning activities into their classes with the objective of educating students about the prevention of diabetes and/or the control of the disease. It has become apparent that one of the major problems confronting the community is the general lack of knowledge about the disease. Many people assume a rather fatalistic attitude about diabetes, incorrectly assuming that if it runs in the family, then it will be only a matter of time before other family members are diagnosed as diabetic, all this without a thought to the positive impact that possible changes in diet or lifestyle could have.

But Turtle Mountain is a community that, as of late, has shown that it is willing to fight back against a disease that is claiming far too many of its people. The new line of thinking is reflected in a series of posters with the heading “You’ve Got the Power to Prevent Diabetes” (Honoring Our Health Diabetes Prevention Coalition [poster]). Such posters communicate the importance of making vital changes in eating habits and making exercise a vital part of everyday living. Others suggest the importance of working together. One poster, for example, states “Let’s help one another. . . . Diabetes prevention is a lifestyle. For some of us, adopting this lifestyle may involve changing our habits and priorities. Diabetes prevention is about living life to the fullest in body, mind and spirit. It’s about passing on traditions and wisdom to future generations. Diabetes prevention brings an improved sense of wellbeing and a future for our tribe” (Honoring Our Health Diabetes Prevention Coalition [poster]).

Working together to promote healing and wholeness has produced much-needed funding to finance activities and support healing countermeasures in the community. Native Americans across the land are familiar with the act of giving to strengthen themselves and others. Capitalizing on this admirable trait, faculty and staff at TMCC organized a silent auction of donated items which included televisions, digital cameras, DVD players, a quilt top, electrical appliances, decorative household items, books, toys, etc. When the auction was over and money counted, the college had slightly over \$1,200.00 in funds to use to launch activities that would promote and educate people about the value of dietary changes and exercise in preventing and controlling diabetes. One of the service learning partners, the Rolette County Wellness Coalition, hosted the movie *Supersize Me* for students to gain appreciation of the dangers inherent in unhealthy eating practices. Attendees were automatically entered into a drawing for prizes purchased with the proceeds of the auction. Such prizes consisted of attractive baskets filled with fresh fruit, toys for Easter baskets (which were meant to replace the usual candy dumped into baskets for children), books, and other items. Students were invited to do reflective writing on how the movie spoke to them about the dangers of a steady high fat/carb diet. One typical comment from the writing states, "When I went to see the documentary of *Supersize Me*, I was shocked by what I found out about fast food diets.... This was an eye opener to me personally, so I can watch what my family consumes more carefully" (Longtree ).

Next, the Service Learning Committee formed a partnership with the Turtle Mountain Community College Wellness Center and created a project known as the Fitness Challenge. Utilizing Wellness Center equipment, people who signed up for the Fitness Challenge consented to a Body Mass Index scan and weight check. They contracted to begin a regular exercise program and to make changes in their diets in an effort to improve the BMI scan readings by the end of the school year. Each participant agreed, as well, to either keep a log of activities during this period or to do reflective writing of revelations, successes and failures during the challenge period. Once again, the funds from the silent auction were used to entice people into joining the challenge and to maintain high levels of motivation.

Recently a *Newsweek* article suggests a startling new benefit to rigorous physical exercise: "Exercise does more than build muscles and help prevent heart disease. New science shows that it also boosts brainpower—and may offer hope in the battle against Alzheimer's" (Carmichael, 2007). Service learning participants are excited about this article since it suggests that regular exercise promotes wholeness and health, which addresses both mind and body. Over seventy individuals, including faculty, staff, students, and elders, signed up for the challenge and were actively committed to watching their dietary intake and to exercising regularly. When the challenge ended in the middle of May, the Administrative Council voted to recognize the achievements of nine participants who made the greatest gains in acquiring a healthier lifestyle.

Many others also improved their lives through changes that they made. Especially encouraging were the number of people whose reflections showed they had made changes that benefited not only the participant but the participant's family as well. Children learned to eat salads with their meals and to limit the unhealthy treats in their diets as they watched parents make changes.

On sign-up day for the Fitness Challenge, TMCC service learning representatives invited two other partnerships to participate in the kick-off for the project: Indian Health Service and the Tribal Diabetes Program. Their tables adjoined the table for the Fitness Challenge staff. IHS staff proceeded to do blood glucose screening for the participants and even those individuals who did not immediately sign up for the challenge. Those individuals who showed signs of abnormal readings were referred back to IHS for further testing. Next to IHS was another table of service learning students who screened blood pressure and distributed pamphlets on the low, normal, and high ranges, again referring those individuals with abnormally high readings to IHS for further consultation. One student involved in the blood pressure screening later commented on the experience in her reflective writing, "After taking almost sixty or so readings, it made me realize that health is no joking matter to some people and I should take a close look at my own health" (Longtree, 2007).

During the week before Easter, the Nutrition class, the Early Childhood classes, the Speech classes, and others worked with community partners and planned activities to educate people about Easter baskets for children and ways to make holiday dinners healthier for diabetics and others. Service learners prepared a number of Easter baskets, which were *not* being filled with jelly beans, chocolate Easter bunnies, etc. These baskets, similar in all other respects to what people would expect, were instead filled with a variety of toys for children, including jump ropes and balls to encourage children to be active, and also to eat fresh fruit. Service learning students prepared general information about the typical potential harm to children caused by high sugar intake and inactivity and the benefits and appeal of toys for active play and fresh fruit. To be eligible for the drawings, people simply had to find Easter eggs that had been hidden throughout the college. Everyone seemed to enjoy hunting for the eggs, and it was apparent that the information in the eggs was being read since several participants noticed that the same information was in more than one egg. Each egg contained facts and tips on healthy choices, which were taken from research notes done by Composition II students. Drawings were held for prizes and gifts, including coupons for fresh produce at an area grocery store, and the baskets were awarded along with the rest of the prizes. The intent was to get the message out to parents, grandparents, and other relatives that, despite long standing tradition, baskets filled with candy may not be the best gift in a community where already over fifty-seven percent of the children are at risk for developing Type II diabetes.

Other activities that took place for the *Have a Happy and Health Easter* promotion, included helping people learn about ways to modify the typical holiday meal to make it

healthier for diabetics and others. Recipes for healthier variations of popular holiday fare were distributed, and drawings were held for the makings for two healthy Easter dinners. Students also explained to people who stopped by to register why an Easter dinner of turkey rather than ham is preferable for diabetics and what to consider when planning holiday meals.

Another service learning activity that proved to be very popular was a Healthy Cook-Off held in conjunction with the annual Expo at the college. Participants were invited to enter healthy foods in one of five categories: breads and quick breads, traditional Native American foods, main dish recipes, snacks, and desserts. Many entries were received, and a number of people suggested making the cook-off an annual event. So many people asked for copies of recipes that a cookbook is going to be prepared that will include the winning recipes.

At the same time that the cook-off was being held, student service learners also provided spectators with information about the impact of diet on health. One student had prepared a very effective display called "The Empty Place at the Table," which featured a picture of her mother, who died last summer from complications of diabetes, beside a typical place setting for a holiday meal. Another picture of the student, who is also a diabetic, with her grandchild was also displayed, along with the message that she is making an effort to take care of herself so she will not be the missing person at her children's and grandchildren's holiday meals. It was an extremely effective display that clearly made many people think about the impact diabetes has on the reservation and what people can do to keep themselves and their loved ones healthy.

Often people who aspire to good health for their children and themselves are helpless to reach that objective without an awareness of how those goals might be reached. Many people do not understand the harmful impact of food, complicated by sedentary life-styles. Providing an environment where instructors integrate such knowledge into their respective disciplines and reaffirm it by involving their students in useful service to the community may ultimately prove decisive in this reservation's attempt to overcome the destructive swath that diabetes has cut through the community.

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHORS:**

**Andrew (Andy) Johnson** has worked as a high school English teacher, a secondary principal, a GED instructor, and a school superintendent. Now in his twenty-first year at TMCC, his accomplishments include two years as academic dean, the honor of being the first instructor to teach online for TMCC, and former assessment coordinator for the college. Currently, he is a full-time composition instructor, a sitting member of the assessment committee, an online composition instructor, and a service learning project coordinator. **Phone:** 701-477-7817; **E-mail:** [ajohnson@tm.edu](mailto:ajohnson@tm.edu)

**Margaret (Peggy) Johnson** is an associate professor at Turtle Mountain Community College, where she has taught writing and literature classes since 1991. Prior to teaching at Turtle Mountain Community College, she was a secondary teacher for over twenty years. In 1987, she received a Christa McAuliffe Fellowship to explore the use of technology to enhance composition instruction and has been using technology in her teaching since that time. Since 1999, she has taught online classes for the college, and currently all the courses she teaches are either online or blended classes. Currently she is a service learning project coordinator for TMCC and is a strong advocate of service learning as a way to enhance student learning. **Phone:** 701-477-7817 ; **E-mail:** [pjohnson@tm.edu](mailto:pjohnson@tm.edu)