

Boys & Girls Club celebrates Indian culture

By Lornet Turnbull
Seattle Times staff reporter

The nation's first Boys & Girls Club for urban American Indians opens today in Seattle.

Housed in the El Centro de la Raza complex on Beacon Hill, IWASIL Boys & Girls Club will serve King County's Native American youths with programs and activities relevant to their culture.

"While the club is being driven by Native American values, our overriding goal is to reach out to those in the community who have been systematically excluded," said Ryan Wilson, program chairman.

"I have this belief that if you have a culturally relevant curriculum and staff, young people and their parents will gravitate toward that."

In the Lushootseed language, IWASIL means "to make positive change in one's life." An organization of the same name has existed in Seattle for 20 years, providing cultural activities, juvenile-court advocacy, career guidance and education to urban Native American youths. Initially, the club will operate as an extension of Rainier Vista Boys & Girls Club.

Boys & Girls Clubs of America is a nationwide network of more than 3,300 neighborhood-based facilities offering guidance to disadvantaged young people.

The organization opened its first club for American Indian youths in rural Pine Ridge, S.D., 10 years ago. Since then, 143 other clubs have opened on reservations, including one other in Washington state, but none in urban areas, where more than half the American Indian population lives.

"Our mission is a commitment to serving the underserved population," said Daniel Johnson, president/CEO of the Boys & Girls Club of King County.

"Native kids, native Alaskans are falling through the cracks," he said. "They don't fare well in school, they are at the bottom of the heap; their dropout rate is extremely high; they are overrepresented in the juvenile-correction system. Those are all indicators that we are not reaching out to this population."

In 2000, the U.S. census counted nearly 16,000 people in King County who described themselves as American Indian or Native Alaskan, 26 percent of them under 18.

"Native youths do not traditionally involve themselves in many of (mainstream) programs," said Adrian Verzola, unit director for IWASIL. "They don't participate much in school. They often feel left out."

While the dropout rate among Native American students in Seattle public schools has improved in the past two years, at 37 percent it remains the highest for any ethnic group in the district, said Mike Tulee, program manager for the district's Native American/Alaskan Native program.

Andrea Alexander, president of Potlatch, a tribe-led organization that raises money for American Indian efforts, says the Boys & Girls program will serve a need.

"As an urban Indian moving back from the reservation, I see few or no programs serving the needs of tribal people," she said. "Urban natives are totally invisible, constantly overlooked. I see all the resources focused on tribal folks at the reservation level. The bottom line is (that) for economic reasons, a lot of people are moving back to the urban areas," she said.

Lornet Turnbull: lturnbull@seattletimes.com or 206-464-2420