

Penobscot launches \$6M endowment fund for youth club

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Posted: May 12, 2008

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Photos courtesy Penobscot Nation Boys & Girls Club --
 (Top) The Penobscot Nation Boys & Girls Club operates year-round and provides programs that are educational and cultural and involve active participation from its members. The Boys & Girls Club, which currently has 200 members, serves Native and non-Native children from Indian Island, Maine, and surrounding communities. (Bottom) Members of the Penobscot Nation Boys & Girls Club formed a circle around the club's motto on the floor of the center. PNBGC has started a fundraising drive for a \$6 million endowment to ensure the program's financial well-being and reduce its total dependence on grants.

INDIAN ISLAND, Maine - The Penobscot Indian Nation was the first tribal nation in the Northeast to establish a Boys & Girls Club. Now, after eight years of successful growth, the club has launched a \$6 million endowment fund campaign to ensure its financial well-being.

The Penobscot Nation Boys & Girls Club serves schoolchildren through grade 12. The center is housed in the Penobscot community building and runs year-round.

"We currently provide free services for over 200 local youth at our facility," PNBGC Executive Director Carla Fearon said. "With our character and leadership development, education and career development, health and life skills, the arts and fitness and recreation, we are training the future leaders of the Penobscot government and stewards of our environment."

The Boys & Girls Club of America is a nonprofit national organization established in 1906. Its mission: to "enable all young people, especially those who need us most, to reach their full potential as productive, caring, responsible citizens," according to the organization's Web site.

The organization serves in excess of 140,000 American Indian, Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian youth in more than 200 clubs in 86 communities in 25 states.

Over the past eight years, the club has grown into a 10-employee operation with an annual budget of \$350,000.

Like other Boys & Girls clubs around the country, the Penobscot club is seeking to build an endowment fund that will ensure a certain measure of financial independence.

"We apply for funds through foundations, the Boys & Girls Club of America for pass-through grants, through any grants that focus on children. But grants are becoming so competitive now," Fearon said. "So we're setting up the endowment fund to extend the programs we offer and to keep the programs going. One of the worst things is to set up a successful program and then not be able to continue it. I've seen that happen several times."

The endowment fund won't provide the club's total operating budget, but will make it less dependent on grants, she said.

The PNBGC offers a wide array of youth programs, including after-school

homework help, a recreation program, drug and alcohol resistance, a food and nutrition program and diabetes prevention.

Special programs are held in the summer, including an award-winning canoe club.

"We just purchased lacrosse equipment, so we hope to get a team going. We also have a boardwalk that was built last year in cooperation with our housing program, and there's some work to be done on that. It's called 'Restoring the Sacred.' So there are outdoor activities all day and we even feed the members free of charge," Fearon said.

The club is open to both Native and non-Native youth from the communities around Indian Island. Around 10 percent of the 200 members are non-Native.

The club's cultural training takes center stage, Fearon said.

"We have a cultural coordinator for the club. We feel it's very important. John Neptune teaches traditional drumming, singing and dancing. We have a basketmaking class [and] sweetgrass picking. Our language is taught in cooperation with [the nation's] cultural department."

Fearon said she is confident that donors in Maine and beyond will pitch in financially to help tribal youth.

"Among all the positive attributes that occur when any club is established, we have a special component at our center. We are using our resources to preserve more than 10,000 years of our culture with language, education, art and environmental

programs. This is the unique and special gift that we offer.

"We are able to prepare our youth to lead our tribe at a level that our elders have always dreamed of."

The endowment fund drive has already raised around \$250,000 and recently got a big boost from Tom Chappell, the founder of Tom's of Maine. The company was established in 1970 and was one of the earliest producers of natural personal care products, including its famous toothpastes, which are now found at more than 40,000 retailers across the country and around the world.

"Not only has Tom provided the seed money to kick off our campaign, he will also be very helpful in encouraging others to match his generosity. We are extremely excited by his commitment to our youth," Fearon said.

Tax-deductible contributions can be sent to Penobscot Nation Boys & Girls Club, 12 Wabanaki Way, Indian Island, ME 04468.

