



THERE'S A FOCUSED SET TO EMILY EARRING'S (LAKOTA) FACE as she glides smoothly around on her stickered-up board in one of the bowls at the Denver Skate Park.

The 15-year-old traveled hundreds of miles from her home in South Dakota to be here for the Stronghold Society's One Gathering Skate For Life annual skateboard competition, which attracted about 150 entrants to the day-long event.

Earring attempts to carve one of the bowl's higher walls. Her knees bend and suddenly she and the board are vertical, flying up and around the lip of the bowl.

She says skateboarding has given her opportunities she never thought possible growing up on or near Indian reservations, which tend to lack anything resembling the kind of skate park Denver boasts. It's helped her build confidence and a network of positive role models, including Walt Pourier (Oglala Lakota), who encourage her to attempt tricks that defy the laws of physics – and stereotypes.

More than that, she says the skateboard has become her shield, and she is a warrior in the struggles many Native youth face. With her trusty skateboard underfoot, Earring has navigated the rough terrain of what it is to be a Native teenager.

SKATE

FOR LIFE

HEALTH AND CULTURE BENEFITS AWAIT NATIVE YOUTH AT SKATE PARKS

BY TATÉ WALKER (MNICONJOU LAKOTA)

“I think skateboarding represents having a place to fit in if you’re a Native kid who isn’t into team sports like basketball or football. It allows for more diversity for their identity,” says Pourier, executive director of the Stronghold Society, a 5-year-old nonprofit based in Denver. “The skate park becomes like a home, a place to grow, to be healthy and active... It’s theirs. They can take it as far as they want it.”

The completion of two skate parks – which Pourier says rival that of Denver’s – on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota late this summer marks a steadily growing trend in Indian Country to find new ways to engage youth and communities reeling from an epidemic of suicides.

“Our movement is about finding creative means to inspire Native youth through skate parks, to help give them a voice and a place to be inspired,” says Pourier, whose organization spearheaded campaigns to build the two WK4-Directions Skateparks in the reservation towns of Pine Ridge and Manderson over the course of the last three years.

Profits from the annual skateboarding competition in Denver help fund the organization’s efforts to build skate parks on the reservation.

But the movement is bigger than simply building skate parks, Pourier insists, noting how the skate parks function as a springboard to tackle other issues the youth face. “That’s where we reach those kids.”





While skateboarding culture – including in-line skating and scooters – isn't new to Native communities, the sport continues to resonate with many Native youth, and tribes are willing to think outside of brick and mortar clinics and counseling in favor of polyurethane wheels on concrete in their efforts to curb depression and suicide.

SKATEBOARDING SAVED MY LIFE

The Pine Ridge reservation has seen too many of its youth fall to hopelessness and suicide, Pourier says. Since December 2014, more than nine people ages 12 to 24 have committed suicide; from December to March, more than 100 people in that age range attempted suicide, according to the federal Indian Health Service.

Nationally, suicide is the second leading cause of death for Native youth ages 15 to 24, and it occurs at 2.5 times the national rate, according to the White House's 2014 Native Youth Report.

"I love skateboarding so much," proclaims Earring, who lives in Rapid City, South Dakota. "Just the feeling of coping and carving. I am free... Every sad, depressing thought I ever had disappears."

"This sport saved my life," she says. Like many Native youth, Earring has friends who committed suicide. She says she, too, suffered from depression.

Now the spunky and positive Earring is the Stronghold Society's literal poster child for the kind of impact skateboarding and skate parks can have on Native youth. A photo of Earring grinding her board on the lip of a bowl was turned into a full-page ad for Wounded Knee Skateboards – a Stronghold Society partner – in Juice Magazine earlier this year and featured on the Girl is NOT a 4 Letter Word website.

Earring began skating four years ago. The board she brought with her was small and princess-themed, all pinks and purples and light blues with plastic-y wheels. Her dad had given it to her for Christmas.

Earring says this board didn't last long; someone at a skate competition in Pine Ridge broke it. As a replacement, she was handed a different board whose deck was made out of Canadian Maple wood and designed with a screen print image of Sitting Bull.

"They [the Stronghold Society] put the board in my hands and said, 'Here, this is what will keep you alive.' Well, they didn't actually say that, but they said I could do whatever I want with the board and it would keep me on the right path," Earring recalls. "They were right."

Earring says she went through a dark phase filled with bullying made worse through social media, alcoholic family members, and isolation. As a kid with little interest in team sports, and even less interest in wearing

make up or high heels, skateboarding had major appeal for Earring.

"The skateboard is my happy, because I can control it. If I want to fly up in the air, I can do that," Earring explains. "Skateboarding is a way up and out."

Earring makes the 100-mile journey from Rapid City to the Pine Ridge skate park as often as she can. The high school sophomore spends the money she makes at her part-time job to help with gas for her rides. While there are places to skate where she lives, she prefers the park near friends and family.

"I just really like the energy and the way they built it, and that there's always positive people around it," she says.

That's the goal of skate park, Pourier says. "We want to see kids smile again. Laugh again. Be able to push some of the negative energy out," he says. "Let's start setting up a grand idea: That this is a huge and wonderful time to be indigenous."

SUICIDE PREVENTION

Pourier hesitates to focus too much on the suicides plaguing Native communities.

"When the focus remains on the suicide aspect, the poverty aspect, and all those negative things, we're giving kids an identity by telling the same sad story over and over again," he says.

While suicide prevention is the underlying framework of the Stronghold Society, Pourier prefers a more positive spin for his efforts with Native youth.

"It's what we call our 'Live Life Call to Action Campaign,' activities that will hopefully help change the mindset of young people," Pourier explains. Our message is this: 'You thrive, I thrive, we thrive.'"

The Stronghold Society partnered with several big names in skateboarding, including Jeff Ament of Pearl Jam and the Vitalogy Foundation, the Tony Hawk Foundation, Vans, and Levi Strauss & Co. to fund and complete the two WK4-Directions Skateparks, which were designed and constructed by Seattle-based Grindline Skateparks.

Primary support comes from Jim Murphy, a pro skater from the Tony Alva "Alva Posse" skate crew of the 1980s, and owner of Wounded Knee Skateboards. Murphy is also the Stronghold Society's skate parks director.

"When you see the vibes these parks create, when you see 100-plus kids a day at the skate park, when you have people calling you because they can't remember when they last saw their kids so happy – there's a spark in Pine Ridge people haven't seen in a long time," says Pourier, who grew up there.

Much of the parks were built with donated labor and supplies, including assistance from the tribe and community members. Many of the workers slept in tents rather than waste allotted funds on motel rooms.



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SKATEBOARD CULTURE MEETS NATIVE CULTURE

Organizations to know:

Stronghold Society, a nonprofit dedicated to uplifting youth via art, music, sports, culture, and more. <http://strongholdsociety.org>

Wounded Knee Skateboards designs and sells Native-themed skateboards and skater accessories with many proceeds benefiting Native youth and communities. <http://woundedkneeskateboards.net/Site/>

Eighth Generation: Urban style and functionality meet indigenous identity and creativity, including street shoes and skate decks. <http://eighthgeneration.com>

Native Skates produces high quality skate decks and wheels to help promote Native pride and skateboarding for Native youth. In addition, the company promotes the annual All Nations Skate Jam, as well as Nibwaakaawin, a nonprofit organization dedicated to empowering Indian youths through skateboarding. <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Native-Skates/161033043924980?sk=timeline>

Apache Skateboards is part advocacy, part art, part production company, and all skater. Their Facebook About page says Apache Skateboards is not "a let's save the Indians with skateboarding organization." <http://apacheskateboards.com>

4wheelwarpony Skateboard Company
<https://www.facebook.com/4wheelwarpony/timeline>

Pourier says each park is worth double the cost of the more than \$200,000 in estimated funds it took to construct. Catering to both street and vert skaters, the parks feature stairs, rails, and boxes, as well as bowls and pools.

"The bowl in Pine Ridge is a top-of-the-line bowl, probably the best in a six-state region," Pourier proclaims. "People travel there to skate it. Skate pros make Pine Ridge one of their stops now. That's huge."

Bigger still is the impact. The Stronghold Society and Wounded Knee Skateboards sponsor kids across the reservation with skateboards and accessories, giving away as much as 80 percent of their inventory. The professional-grade equipment is worth around \$200.

"Native youth deserve the best skate parks," Pourier insists. "They advance farther, become better skaters, because of the high quality of the park and skateboards."

NATIONAL PICTURE

Tribal communities across the United States have made a priority out of building quality skate parks their youth can be proud of.

Thunder Park on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation in Montana celebrated its grand opening earlier this summer. The Quechan Indian Tribe in Arizona made headlines a year ago when leaders there refused donated funds from the Washington NFL team owner Dan Snyder's Original American Foundation to build a skate park.

In California, Oklahoma, Minnesota, Florida, and many other states, tribes have put hundreds of thousands of dollars into their parks over the last decade.

The Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe in Washington unveiled its skate park in the spring of 2014 after artist Louie Gong (Nooksack) finished painting indigenous designs on the bare concrete. Now worn away by the wheels and shoes of many skaters, the tribe recently asked Gong back to create more permanent sculptural art around the skate park.

"Skateboarding values individual expression," says Gong, a former educator who got into art primarily through customizing Vans shoes with traditional Pacific Northwest tribal designs. For their park, S'Klallam Tribe purchased the art materials and Gong donated his time and talent to paint Coast Salish imagery based on input from tribal youth.

"For me, when I started working in art... there were no constructs around what good shoe art was supposed to look like," says Gong, founder of Eighth Generation. "Skating provides the same outlet for youth. It's a blank canvas for them to write create their personality."

Like Pourier, Gong and Josh Wisniewski, who works for the S'Klallam tribe, believe skate parks can be used as another tool to empower Native youth and deter them from negative activities.

"There are signs... saying 'No Skateboarding,' but I'd look out my window and regardless of the weather I'd see kids [skating]," recalls Wisniewski, the tribe's anthropologist and skater. "On the reservation, kids don't really have anywhere to go if they like skateboarding. There are playgrounds for little kids, and gymnasiums for recreation like basketball, but those don't attract all kids."

Wisniewski was instrumental in assisting the Native youth-led effort to build the park, which was funded by the Sheckler Foundation in exchange for tribal sweat equity.

Today, the skate park gets a lot of non-reservation traffic, but



Wisniewski keeps it relevant for tribal youth through summer programming. Donated equipment teaches school-aged youth the basics of skateboarding in a camp-like setting.

“Our skate park was very punk rock, let’s-just-make-this-happen kind of vibe and doing something without all the bureaucracy that usually goes along with something like this,” Wisniewski says. “It’s urban street culture but indigenizing it through all the different ways people express their culture, whether through art, or teaching others, or hosting a traditional S’Klallum clam bake at the park.”

COMBINING CULTURES

Though the skate park environment isn’t always the most positive – drugs, alcohol, and peer pressure sometimes make an appearance – Earring says it’s while she’s landing tricks like the varial kick-flip that she’s most in tune with her culture and spirit.

“I do Lakota ceremony, but for me, skateboarding is also like ceremony,” Earring explains. “It’s summer. It’s hot. You’re going from 10 in the morning ‘til 9 at night – the whole day sometimes without food or water, just skate skate skate, giving flesh offerings every time I fall.”

Knowing one’s culture and having a place in it is often the key to turning youth in a positive direction, Pourier says. “The further back you can look the further forward you can see,” he adds.

Gong agrees.

“When you have this unnatural movement toward standardization – whether that’s because education institutions want to standardize outcomes or we want everyone in our community to achieve certain goals, like college – when we get so focused on that we lose site of the individual,” Gong says.

“I think what we’re seeing with skate parks in Indian Country and all the work that goes into planning and fundraising and building is they are a really great way to educate kids about their own traditions and about themselves and what they’re capable of,” Gong adds.

“When we let kids express themselves, we set a standard that recognizes culture as something that grows and changes over time, that recognizes the needs and interests of kids as legitimate and authentic and valid no matter what.”

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