

Pawating Native American Elder Meal Program

Each year Belinda Henderson attends a black farmers conference. Belinda is a seed keeper, a practice inspired by the wisdom of her ancestors. Enslaved women from Africa braided seeds in their hair as a means of preserving their culture and providing indigenous food for their families when everything else – language, heritage, and homeland were being taken from them.

I carried this story with me as we began envisioning the Native American Elder Meal Program at First Church. The goal of the program is simple. Prepare and deliver twelve healthy meals to homebound Native Elders living in eight different locations in the Grand Rapids area.

The layers of learning behind the program - not so simple. Researching Native history, food sovereignty, decolonized food as medicine, native American cookbooks, indigenous food sourcing was all part of the process. Most essential is listening deeply to native voices that go unheard. Most challenging is having the discipline to start slow, build trust, and give ourselves permission to learn from our mistakes.

Unfair treaties, shrinking tribal land, and Indigenous boarding schools have all played a painful part in stripping Native people of their culture, language, land and agricultural practices. For many Native families the honorable harvesting of Mother Earth has been replaced by grocery shopping at gas stations, liquor stores and dollar stores resulting in high rates of obesity, diabetes and heart disease. Health disparities in Native populations are well above the national average. Careful preparation of dairy free and gluten free meals using wild rice and venison and other indigenous elements is an act of justice, promoting the well-being of our Native brothers and sisters who do not have access to healthy food.

The catalyst for our Native American Elder Food Program came earlier this year through a course lead by Kalie Charnley (Climate Justice Chair) featuring the book “Braiding Sweetgrass”, by Robin Wall Kimmerer and later through a Michigan Conference article highlighting the Pawating community meal gatherings at Northlawn Church. Inspiration translated into action thanks to the leadership of Dave Rowe (Social Justice Committee chair) and Rhonda Loonsfoot (Director of Pawating Native American Elder Program) partnering with Susan Bloss and Sue Rowe (kitchen managers, chefs and menu planners) and FUMC teams of cooks and drivers, successfully launching the meal program in early October. This ministry team has done an outstanding job of nourishing our neighbors. Please share a word of gratitude when you see them.

To learn more about the Native American Elder Meal Program be sure to stop by the Mission Fair on December 10 and extend warm greetings to Rhonda Loonsfoot as you enjoy her display of Native culture and crafts.