




We Are, All of Us Together, Beginning a Good Life

Gimaajii-Mino-Bimaadizimin

American Indian Community Housing Organization
Duluth, Minnesota

CASE STUDY OF CULTURE IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

By Rachel Engh and Anne Gadwa Nicodemus, *Metris Arts Consulting*

Commissioned by 

Named after an Ojibwe phrase that translates as “we are, all of us together, beginning a good life” Gimaajii-Mino-Bimaadizimin is a community center and 29 units of permanent supporting housing for Native American women and children in downtown Duluth, Minnesota.



The Oshkii Giizik Singers in a Red Shawl Ceremony, part of a community gathering at the start of Sex Trafficking Awareness Month (January 2017).
Photo by Ivy Vainio

Named after an Ojibwe phrase that translates as “we are, all of us together, beginning a good life” Gimaajii-Mino-Bimaadizimin is a community center and 29 units of permanent supporting housing for Native American women and children in downtown Duluth, Minnesota. Many people make up that “we” in Gimaajii, a 50,000-square-foot historic YWCA building, now housing 32,000 square feet of permanent supportive housing, restored and repurposed by the American Indian Community Housing Organization (AICHO). AICHO’s commitment to cultural organizing includes culturally specific programming for residents and other community members. At Gimaajii, this programming happens not only formally in its two art galleries and rooftop garden; Native American culture also permeates every corner of Gimaajii in more subtle ways, from the music on the lobby’s speakers to the smell of sage that wafts through the building.

Residents live on Gimaajii’s upper floors, and on the lower levels AICHO operates the Gimaajii Gathering Place, which includes 13 office and community meeting spaces, a gymnasium, an art gallery, and the Dr. Robert Powless Cultural Center. In-house organizations at Gimaajii that are led by and/or serve Native Americans include AICHO, local tribal bands, the domestic abuse T.A. project Mending the Sacred Hoop, and the RICH Center (Research for Indigenous Community Health), a program of University of Minnesota Duluth’s College of Pharmacy. These organizations, residents, and artists who show their work in Gimaajii’s galleries benefit from co-location.

Native American culture also permeates every corner of Gimaajii in more subtle ways, from the music on the lobby’s speakers to the smell of sage that wafts through the building.

We relied on many perspectives to weave the story of Gimaajii's impacts. We brought together eight Native American artists for a focus group and interviewed 17 people with various relationships with Gimaajii, including staff and board members, artists, and a resident, as well as staff from other housing and human services government agencies, local nonprofits that focus on homelessness and Native American health, and funders. We also toured the facilities. Although AICHO only opened Gimaajii's doors in 2012, we heard and saw how Native American and non-Native American communities in Duluth and beyond have already benefitted in many substantial and life-changing ways.

History and Context

Gimaajii's development is like *Rocky*, a story of an embattled dreamer facing long odds but never willing to give up. Duluth, a college town and major port with 86,000 residents, sits on Lake Superior, two and a half hours north of the Twin Cities. Native Americans made up a disproportionate share of Duluth's homeless, according to studies in 2006 by both the Wilder Foundation and United Way. Though Native Americans represented only 3 percent of the city's population, they made up fully 30 percent of those without a fixed address.¹ One anonymous interviewee believes that organizations that work to end homelessness in Duluth have known about the situation, but struggled to reach out and connect with the Native American community.²



Artists Jay Newcomb (left) and Carl Gawboy (right) with their collaboration art piece, on display at the Dr. Robert Powless Cultural Center at Gimaajii. Photo by Ivy Vainio

AICHO envisioned that Gimaajii would help address Duluth's high Native American homeless rates and also provide an inter-tribal community center, a priority voiced by Native community members since the Duluth Indigenous Commission's formation in 2002.³ AICHO struggled to secure financing to complete the project and there were times that some funders questioned its capacity. This was in part due to the fact that, although the organization had managed transitional housing since 1993, it had never before undertaken a project of this magnitude.⁴ As a Native-led project that would house Native American women and children, racism may have also impeded AICHO's ability to secure funding, with multiple interviewees volunteering instances in which AICHO faced bias over its history.⁵

1 Michelle LeBeau, personal interview, interview by Anne Gadwa Nicodemus, April 24, 2017; Minnesota Housing Partnership, "Gimaajii-Mino-Bimaadizyann Is First in MN to Combine American Indian Center with Permanent Housing for Homeless," March 2013, <http://www.mhponline.org/about/impact/78-2013-impact-spotlight/447-gimaajii-mino-bimaadizimin>.

2 Anonymous interviewee, personal interview, April 25, 2017.

3 Anonymous interviewee, personal interview, April 24, 2017.

4 Pam Kramer, personal interview, interview by Rachel Engh, April 25, 2017.

5 LeBeau, personal interview; Tina Olson, personal interview, interview by Rachel Engh, April 25, 2017; anonymous interviewee, personal interview, April 25, 2017.

TABLE 1
Gimaajii Support

	Amount (\$)		Amount (\$)
Minnesota Housing Finance Agency <i>1602 Deferred Loan</i>	2,400,000	City of Duluth Community Development Block Grant	150,000
United States Department of the Interior <i>Federal Historic Tax Credit Equity</i>	1,099,000	Otto Bremer Foundation <i>Grant</i>	100,000
Minnesota Historical Society <i>State Historic Tax Credit Grant</i>	1,000,000	National Trust for Historic Preservation <i>Grant</i>	100,000
Minnesota Housing Finance Agency <i>Housing Trust Fund Grant</i>	685,000	Hennepin County Lead Funds <i>Abatement Grant</i>	50,000
Duluth Housing Investment Funds <i>Grant</i>	600,000	Dr. Robert Powless <i>Grant</i>	50,000
Minnesota Housing Finance Agency <i>UTHP Grant Funds</i>	519,400	LISC/Home Depot <i>Grant</i>	40,000
Federal Home Loan Bank <i>Grant</i>	500,000	LISC <i>Grant</i>	38,000
Greater Minnesota Housing Fund <i>Deferred Loan</i>	426,600	Donations	25,000
City of Duluth HOME Grant	237,000	Grand Portage Community <i>Grant</i>	20,000
Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community <i>Grant</i>	150,000	Lloyd K. Johnson Foundation <i>Grant</i>	20,000
Minnesota Tribal Gov. Foundations Grant	150,000	Total Development Cost	8,360,000

Values rounded to the nearest thousand

The turning point came when Dr. Robert Powless, professor emeritus of American Indian Studies at the University of Minnesota Duluth and an enrolled member of the Oneida Nation of Wisconsin, made a personal commitment of \$50,000 and gave an impassioned plea for funding to the Minnesota Housing Finance Agency (MHFA). Ultimately, for the \$8.4 million development, AICHO cobbled together low-income housing and historic tax credits, loans, grants, and donations from 17 different funders and an array of small donors (Table 1). Despite all the challenges, “[AICHO] kept pushing forward,”⁶ and in 2012, Gimaajii opened its doors.

AICHO grounds its work in Native American culture. The staff embody AICHO’s vision “to strengthen community by centering indigenous values in all aspects of our work,” through relationships between tenants and staff, between staff and artists, between AICHO and other organizations, and among AICHO staff. Native Americans make up the majority of AICHO’s staff and board, a critical component of cultural competency.⁷ AICHO’s awareness of the complexity of trauma underpins how the organization prioritizes holistic uses and programming for the building. For instance, AICHO staff believe that healing happens not only through safe and clean housing but also through a web of other services, resources, culture (e.g., feasts and other cultural ceremonies), and values (e.g., family, relationships). Through its long-term supportive housing model, AICHO links residents living with multiple challenges, such as trauma, chemical dependency, and mental health issues, with services that increase the likelihood that they find stability and sustained outcomes.⁸

Gimaajii’s central location in downtown Duluth on a bus line also increases its accessibility and helps connect its residents to neighboring resources, such as a career development organization.⁹

Physical impacts

AICHO made significant improvements to the old YWCA, “a cornerstone building in downtown Duluth,”¹⁰ which hadn’t been renovated in decades.¹¹ “It was the first time I had seen clean, affordable [apartments with] new appliances for Indians, and I’ve lived in Duluth for 40 years,” says Tina Olson, AICHO board member and executive director of Mending the Sacred Hoop, who got “teary-eyed” when she first laid eyes on Gimaajii’s renovated apartments.¹² Due to historic tax credit financing, AICHO made these renovations while keeping the building’s historic beauty and integrity.¹³

Even beyond the renovations, AICHO staff work hard to nurture a welcoming and safe environment for anyone who enters. “As soon as you walk through the door,” Olson says, “you feel comfortable and good.”¹⁴ A friendly staff member behind the desk helps visitors sign in, and music by Native American artists plays through the speakers.

6 Anonymous interviewee, personal interview, April 25, 2017.

7 Karen Diver, personal interview, interview by Anne Gadwa Nicodemus, April 26, 2017.

8 Diver, personal interview.

9 Robert Powless, personal interview, interview by Rachel Engh, April 25, 2017; anonymous interviewee, personal interview, April 25, 2017; Jana Auginash, personal interview, interview by Rachel Engh, April 25, 2017; anonymous interviewee, personal interview, April 24, 2017.

10 Kathy McTavish, personal interview, interview by Anne Gadwa Nicodemus, April 25, 2017.

11 Olson, personal interview, April 25, 2017; Diver, personal interview.

12 Olson, personal interview, April 25, 2017.

13 Diver, personal interview.

14 Olson, personal interview, April 25, 2017.



Artists Leah Yellowbird and Jonathan Thunder in the Dr. Robert Powless Cultural Center at Gimaajii. Photo by Ivy Vainio

Traditional practices, like smudging with sage, happens on a daily basis, and kids run around mothers with babies in strollers. You can grab a free cup of coffee or water and sit down in one of the comfy chairs by the fireplace. Compared to other buildings she's lived in, resident Jana Auginash says she appreciates visitors' curfews and the lack of loud parties and fights.¹⁵

Social Impacts

Gimaajii may have had its most far-reaching impacts in the social realm. In addition to its housing, the art, artists, and other Native American professionals who frequent Gimaajii inspire its residents and the broader Native American community, who have more opportunities to directly participate in cultural practices thanks to the center. It provides a supportive refuge for Native Americans, and the sense of belonging has extended to other communities of color and the white population who seek out Gimaajii as a place to hold gatherings and events. It also serves to bridge Native and non-Native populations, offering interactions that build empathy, help dispel stereotypes, and foster discourse.

¹⁵ Auginash, personal interview.

SAFETY AND STABILITY FOR FAMILIES

At its most fundamental level, Gimaajii provides safe and stable housing for families facing multiple challenges. As of 2015, 100 percent of Gimaajii households had been homeless long-term, 78 percent of adult women residents had been victims of violence, and 43 percent of residents had one or more disabilities.¹⁶ LeBeau says that when she first started working at AICHO, the staff's lens was, "How can we help the adults make positive changes in their lives?" Staff soon realized that many adults may not be able to make changes to improve their lives so they changed their focus to the children. "How can we impact children's lives so they don't have to go through the same struggles or barriers that their parents have?" she says.¹⁷

In addition to its housing, the art, artists, and other Native American professionals who frequent Gimaajii inspire its residents and the broader Native American community

¹⁶ AICHO (American Indian Community Housing Organization, "AICHO (American Indian Community Housing Organization) 2015 Annual Report" (AICHO, 2015), www.AICHO.org.

¹⁷ LeBeau, personal interview.



AICHO's Urban Garden that was set up behind the Gimajii building in a vacant lot. Photo by Ivy Vainio

AICHO starts by providing a safe and comfortable home, with a bet that the youth that Gimajii supports will grow up to form the core of a healthy community.¹⁸ This change of focus allowed youth and their parents to envision a healthy future.¹⁹ One anonymous interviewee stated:

Mothers look beyond today and next week and a month from now and these children are going to grow up, they've got stability. If they can see a future, that's our economic impact. They're not going to be in the perils that their parents were. [They'll be] contributing to society rather than living day to day and society having to figure out ways to take care of them.²⁰

CONNECTIONS TO CULTURAL PRACTICES

Gimajii provides residents and the community of Native Americans in and around Duluth with opportunities to practice cultural traditions and rituals, from

drumming, regalia-making, and beading workshops to the full moon ceremonies held at Gimajii's rooftop garden. The garden is also a place where youth grow food and ingredients for traditional medicine. John Day, AICHO board member, notes that many of AICHO's clients "would like to know more about their language, culture, or ceremonies." Their involvement with Gimajii cultural programming "leaves little time for negative behaviors. A traditional path does not contain drugs or alcohol. Those clients coming from unhealthy environments who pick up and follow the traditional ways will be stronger and healthier."²¹

INSPIRATION FROM NATIVE AMERICAN ART AND ARTISTS

Art at Gimajii provides Native American residents and visitors with inspiration. Beautiful visual art made by Native American artists (some established professionals, some newly launched, some youth) adorns Gimajii's

18 Anonymous interviewee, personal interview, April 25, 2017.

19 LeBeau, personal interview.

20 Anonymous interviewee, personal interview, April 25, 2017.

21 John Day, personal interview, interview by Rachel Eng, April 24, 2017.

walls, and the Powless Cultural Center provides a venue for book readings and musical performances. In a world where Native Americans often face damaging racial stereotypes, these Native American artists control the narratives in their work and often choose culturally significant themes and techniques—such as Leah Yellowbird’s intricate mixed media paintings, many of which fuse beadwork and incorporate imagery from the natural world.

Through our Eyes, a joint program organized by AICHO and a St. Paul-based nonprofit, In Progress, provided youth with opportunities to positively shape their own narratives and build resiliency. Art produced by nearly a dozen urban indigenous youth living at Gimaajii and in the program include images like Sisters Kayla and Katie embracing under a dreamcatcher with a watercolor-esque background of bright red, blue, and star-like specks. In words next to the image, they affirm their love for one another. In another portrait of their pregnant older sister, the sisters offer original prose next to the image, proudly telling her that she will be “the best, most loving mom ever.”

Karen Diver, one of AICHO’s founding board members and former chairwoman for the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, says of the young artists in the program, “Their whole identity is based on labels they get from different services. To give those kids their own voice and have it be self-determined and not driven by circumstances is really powerful.”²² Youth participants not only gained skills, but felt excitement and pride as they shared their artwork and culture at Gimaajii and within the local community.²³ An exhibit and celebratory

feast for the artists at Gimaajii attracted more than 250 people. AICHO also used the images in its 2017 annual calendar and accompanied youth participants to the state capitol to display their work.

Gimaajii residents (of all ages) and the many others that drop in to this cultural center also have frequent opportunities to see and interact with positive Native role models—the artists featured in the space as well as professors (Dr. Powless regularly holds forth in the lounge, and the UMD pharmacy school is housed inside Gimaajii).²⁴ Native American youth especially benefit from this access; they meet artists who look like them and see artwork that reflects their lives.²⁵ For instance, Auginash says she and her family only have to go downstairs to attend art events at Gimaajii where her daughter sees different styles of art, asks artists questions, and develops her own style.²⁶

CULTIVATING BELONGING AND A REFUGE

Gimaajii serves as a sanctuary in a world that many perceive as unsafe for Native Americans.²⁷ Gimaajii is a place to go “when all the other doors shut in front of you in Duluth,” says Daryl Olson, AICHO’s director of family services. “[People] come in anxious, frustrated, beaten down [and] when they leave, they leave in a better place, a better mindset [because we’re] treating people with dignity and respect.”²⁸ Residents and Native American non-residents feel buoyed from being in Gimaajii. Artist Vern Northrup needs “to get my shot of AICHO now and then.”²⁹

²² Diver, personal interview.

²³ Ivy Vainio, personal interview, interview by Rachel Engh, April 25, 2017; Wendy Savage, Focus Group, interview by Anne Gadwa Nicodemus and Rachel Engh, April 25, 2017; LeBeau, personal interview; Daryl Olson, personal interview, interview by Anne Gadwa Nicodemus, April 24, 2017.

²⁴ Anonymous interviewee, personal interview, April 24, 2017.

²⁵ Diver, personal interview; McTavish, personal interview; Stacy Radosevich, personal interview, interview by Anne Gadwa Nicodemus, April 25, 2017.

²⁶ Auginash, personal interview.

²⁷ Diver, personal interview.

²⁸ Olson, personal interview, April 24, 2017.

²⁹ Vern Northrup, Focus Group, interview by Anne Gadwa Nicodemus and Rachel Engh, April 25, 2017.

BRIDGE BETWEEN DIFFERENT CULTURES

Gimaajii provides a “badly needed” bridge between Native Americans and non-Native Americans in Duluth, a city where “American Indians as well as other diverse community often feel invisible and, before Gimaajii, lacked a space to gather for events, art shows, and cultural activities.”³⁰ Dr. Powless calls Gimaajii a treasure: “Very few communities can speak about a place like this where so many good things are happening that benefit not only Indian people but the whole community. If you look around, you’d see people all sizes, shapes, and colors.”³¹ A diverse variety of people visit Gimaajii because of its art, many of whom otherwise would have no cause to step through its doors.³²

AICHO practices Native American values of hospitality with a focus on family and food, and as a result, Gimaajii also draws non-Native Americans to participate and even host their own events. Several people interviewed for this report cited author Elizabeth Ann Bartlett’s release of her book, *Making Waves: Grassroots Feminism in Duluth and Superior*, in Gimaajii as an example. Non-Native American artists Kathy McTavish³³ and Gene Johnson McKeever both feel connections to Gimaajii. “Everyone is like family even though you’re not related,” McKeever says. “You feel that even though you’re not Native.”³⁴ “People from diverse communities now have a welcoming space to hold events and artistic events,” LeBeau says, pointing to non-Native American communities of color that host art shows and poetry readings in Gimaajii.³⁵

When people of all ages, ethnicities, races, and economic statuses mingle at Gimaajii it’s an opportunity to increase exposure, dispel stigma, and spur discourse around Native American culture.³⁶ For her first solo Gimaajii show, Ivy Vainio asked the people featured in her photographs to provide narrative to accompany the images on why they dance at Powwow, a way to challenge assumptions non-Native Americans may have (e.g. that Powwows are Indians in “costumes”) and serve as an intercultural learning opportunity.³⁷ Projects like *Through Our Eyes*, Wendy Savage notes, help change the perspective of movers and shakers at the capitol³⁸—Stacy Radosevich says her colleagues among the Louis County Department of Human Services staff were “impressed.”³⁹

Even simple interactions between residents and non-residents can engender empathy. “People see the look of wonder on a client’s face,” Diver says. “It helps connect with people in a different way. [It] makes them human and not just program participants.”⁴⁰ Members of Duluth’s police department have even spent time at Gimaajii helping cook for monthly barbecues and sharing a meal with the residents. This type of interaction helps to build trust between police, AICHO, and its residents, especially kids who might have negative perceptions of the police.⁴¹ Artists Moira Villiard and Yellowbird also point out that art can be a platform to explore issues that divide Native American communities, such as living on and off reservations and having one white parent and one Native American parent.⁴²

30 LeBeau, personal interview.

31 Powless, personal interview.

32 Dugan, personal interview; Radosevich, personal interview.

33 McTavish, personal interview.

34 Gene McKeever, personal interview, interview by Rachel Engh, April 26, 2017.

35 LeBeau, personal interview.

36 Diver, personal interview; McTavish, personal interview; Dugan, personal interview; Moira Villiard, Focus Group, interview by Anne Gadwa Nicodemus and Rachel Engh, April 25, 2017.

37 Vainio, personal interview.

38 Savage, Focus Group.

39 Radosevich, personal interview.

40 Diver, personal interview.

41 Olson, personal interview, April 24, 2017.

42 Villiard, Focus Group; Yellowbird, Focus Group.



AICHO's Director of Family Services Daryl Olson presents Dr. Robert Powless with a plaque honoring his contributions to the Native community. *Photo by Ivy Vainio*

Economic Impact

Through Gimaajii, AICHO has advanced economic outcomes in ways that might be surprising for a housing-focused community development corporation (CDC). The facility has created jobs,⁴³ including positions for a new arts and cultural coordinator, community legal advocate, community housing coordinator, children's program coordinator, and domestic violence and sexual assault advocate specialist, and AICHO strives to ensure that its staff represents the populations it supports, which means Native Americans benefit from these employment opportunities.⁴⁴ Gimaajii has also played a significant role in strengthening the ecosystem for Native American artists in the Duluth region.

NATIVE AMERICAN ARTISTS' PEER-DRIVEN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Gimaajii fosters Native American artists' abilities to learn from one another. They attend each other's exhibits and participate in shows with both emerging and more experienced artists. Young and aspiring artists especially benefit from this intentional intergenerational focus.

⁴³ Anonymous interviewee, personal interview, April 25, 2017.

⁴⁴ Diver, personal interview; anonymous interviewee, personal interview, April 24, 2017.

They observe professionals who “aren’t afraid to gab with people about their art,” artist Karen Savage-Blue notes, and they vet prospective opportunities with mentors to make sure they’re getting a fair deal and not being tokenized. For example, with Wendy Savage’s mentorship, Jonathan Thunder now confidently asks interested galleries about logistics, such as if they will pay for transportation. And if a gallery Yellowbird doesn’t know wants to show her work, she’ll ask other artists and LeBeau to vet the gallery’s motivations; she doesn’t want her work to just “fill the Native quota,” sometimes associated with grant money. These types of professional growth happen naturally in Gimaajii.⁴⁵

ADDRESS BARRIERS TO ENTRY FOR NATIVE ARTISTS

Several interviewees described Native American artists feeling invisible in Duluth’s visual art world, with few chances to exhibit in galleries beyond Gimaajii.⁴⁶ When these opportunities do surface, Karen Savage-Blue reported high commission structures that challenged artists’ ability to profitably sell their work.⁴⁷ Rendon and Markusen also document structural barriers to opportunity for Native American artists in Minnesota and the Dakotas, in contrast to the hot southwestern market for Native American art.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ McTavish, personal interview.

⁴⁶ Vainio, personal interview; Olson, personal interview, April 25, 2017; LeBeau, personal interview.

⁴⁷ Karen Savage-Blue, Focus Group, interview by Anne Gadwa Nicodemus and Rachel Engh, April 25, 2017.

⁴⁸ Marcie Rendon and Ann Markusen, “Native Artists: Livelihoods, Resources, Space, Gifts” (Minneapolis, MN: Project on Regional and Industrial Economics. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs. University of Minnesota, 2009), <http://www.hhh.umn.edu/centers/prie/pdf/NativeArtistsLivelihoodsResourcesSpaceGifts1209.pdf>.

In contrast, AICHO staff go above and beyond to make Gimaajii an artist-friendly exhibition venue and in the process, break down barriers to entry for Native American artists. For example, when Villiard arrived with unframed work to hang her first-ever show, AICHO worked hand in hand with her to get the work framed and covered the cost, giving her a body of work ready to show in other venues and essentially launching her career. AICHO takes chances on young or previously unknown artists, charges a low commission, and provides whatever artists need to best highlight their work displayed in both the white-walled gallery and larger Dr. Powless Cultural Center. The care AICHO staffpeople show validates Native American artists,⁴⁹ which Diver contrasts with years past when artists used to come to her office to peddle their work, desperate for money.⁵⁰

SPRINGBOARD FOR NATIVE AMERICAN ARTISTS

Through our interviews and focus group with Native American artists, story after story surfaced in which artists credited an exhibition opportunity at Gimaajii with opening up other opportunities for them to directly earn art-related income. After Vainio's Gimaajii show, for example, the Duluth Art Institute exhibited her work, the University of Minnesota Duluth bought photographs, and several Ojibwe tribal communities across Minnesota bought hundreds of copies of the 2015 AICHO calendar full of her photos, many of which depict youth in Powwow regalia.⁵¹ A new clinic in Duluth recently bought work by multiple Native American artists, including Northrup and Savage-Blue, and Thunder credits school speaking and workshop opportunities with his start at Gimaajii.⁵² "If it hadn't been for AICHO, my work would

49 Anonymous interviewee, personal interview, April 25, 2017.

50 Diver, personal interview.

51 Vainio, personal interview.

52 Jonathan Thunder, Focus Group, interview by Anne Gadwa Nicodemus and Rachel Engh, April 25, 2017.



Jonathan Thunder and his work. Photo by Jonathan Thunder

be sitting in my house. I wouldn't have a career without this place," Yellowbird says.⁵³ Vainio echoes this sentiment: "I do doubt myself every once in a while [but now] I have no qualms saying I'm an artist. AICHO has helped me develop that sense of belonging in the art world."⁵⁴

Gimaajii may also be playing an important role in cultivating a wider audience and market for Native American art. The former director of the Duluth Art Institute credits Gimaajii as a catalyst for increasing the number of local galleries and museums in the community that show art by Native Americans.⁵⁵ Gimaajii art shows attract people who may not frequent other galleries, and some buy their first works of art at the gallery.

53 Yellowbird, Focus Group.

54 Vainio, personal interview.

55 Dugan, personal interview.

Artists credited an exhibition opportunity at Gimaajii with opening up other opportunities for them to directly earn art-related income.

AICHO staff are resourceful in enabling people of middle-class means to purchase art, suggesting, for instance, the recent purchase of a high-quality print on canvas of a Yellowbird piece could be accomplished with an in-house payment plan.⁵⁶

Political/Systemic Impact

Gimaajii has influenced Duluth's political and economic systems primarily through two means: By providing social service agencies and tribal entities with an opportunity to co-locate, it has fostered collaboration. And the success of developing and managing Gimaajii has allowed AICHO to embark on other projects that integrate housing with arts and culture.

CO-LOCATION FOSTERS COLLABORATION BY SERVICE AND TRIBAL ENTITIES

“An incubator” —that’s how McTavish describes Gimaajii, pointing to how the close proximity of co-locating multiple sectors under one roof spurs relationships and collaborations.⁵⁷ For example, not only does the fact that Mending the Sacred Hoop, which works to end violence against Native American women, is housed in Gimaajii allow it to be directly accessible to people it serves,⁵⁸ AICHO staff also attend its trainings and serve as trainers for the organization’s workshops for medical staff. Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe rents an office in Gimaajii

to provide on-site services for band members living in Duluth, and AICHO provides meeting and auditorium space for the band’s annual feasts.⁵⁹ Gimaajii has also served as a hub for social-service-oriented convenings, including providing space for the Affordable Housing Coalition’s gatherings for service providers that address homelessness and for a week-long symposium on sex trafficking, a “huge issue” in Duluth.⁶⁰

GIMAAJII SERVED AS A SPRINGBOARD FOR OTHER AICHO REDEVELOPMENTS

With Gimaajii’s success, AICHO has taken on other developments, as well. Duluth LISC’s director Pam Kramer points to the 10 units of independent housing that AICHO acquired and rehabbed after Gimaajii. AICHO didn’t need to ask LISC for help with a bank loan because its finances were strong enough on their own. AICHO is also a partner on LISC’s craft-business-focused redevelopment of a commercial stretch of the Lincoln Park neighborhood, located southwest of Gimaajii. LISC has provided AICHO with pre-development and operating support to help it develop a mixed-use development: 10 units of housing, with an eco laundromat and art gallery that will also feature a small coffee shop. This is adding to the neighborhood’s growing mix of industrial sewing businesses, a ceramics studio, gift shop, craft brewery, restaurants and other craft manufacturing businesses. Kramer already notices AICHO’s presence in the neighborhood: AICHO coordinated a mural on one wall, improved the building’s facade, and occasionally opens the art gallery that sells work by Native American artists and authors. “It’ll be great to have AICHO part of that neighborhood,” Kramer says.⁶¹

56 Radosevich, personal interview.

57 McTavish, personal interview.

58 Anonymous interviewee, personal interview, April 25, 2017.

59 LeAnn Littlewolf, “Minnesota Coalition for the Homeless – Tribal Organizing Update: Spotlight on AICHO,” *Minnesota Coalition for the Homeless*, December 21, 2015, <http://www.mnhomelesscoalition.org/tribal-organizing-update-spotlight-on-aicho/>.

60 Diver, personal interview.

61 Kramer, personal interview.

Interviews

Anonymous interviewee

Jana Auginash (Red Lake Chippewa), *AICHO Resident*

Catherine Bryan (Navajo Nation), *First Nations
Development Institute*

John Day (Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe), *AICHO Board*

Karen Diver, Former Chair, *Fond du Lac Band of Lake
Superior Chippewa*

Anne Dugan, *Formerly of Duluth Art Institute*

Pam Kramer, *Duluth LIS*

Michelle LeBeau, *AICHO*

LeAnn Littlewolf (Anishinaabe, Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe),
AICHO Board

Gene Johnson McKeever, *Community Member*

Kathy McTavish, *Independent Artist*

Daryl Olson (Yaqui), *AICHO*

Tina Olson (Yaqui), *AICHO Board & Mending the Sacred Hoop*

Dr. Robert Powless (Oneida Nation of Wisconsin), *University
of Minnesota Duluth*

Linda Powless, *Independent Artist & Unitarian Universalist
Arts Council*

Stacy Radosevich, *St. Louis County Human Services*

Ivy Vainio (Grand Portage Band of Ojibwe), *Independent Artist*

Focus Group: Native American Artists

Alayah Johnson-Jennings (Quapaw, Choctaw, and Sac and Fox)

Vern Northrup (Fond du Lac Band of Minnesota Chippewa Tribe)

Laurel Sanders (Sami)

Karen Savage-Blue (Fond du Lac)

Wendy Savage (Fond du Lac)

Jonathan Thunder (Red Lake Ojibwe/Seneca)

Moira Villiard (Fond du Lac Descendant)

Leah Yellowbird (Metis Algonquin Heritage)



Students in Karen Savage-Blue's Paint Night class at Gimajji.
Photo by Ivy Vainio

With residents and partners, LISC forges resilient and inclusive communities of opportunity across America—great places to live, work, visit, do business and raise families. Since 1980, LISC has invested \$17.3 billion to build or rehab 366,000 affordable homes and apartments and develop 61 million square feet of retail, community and educational space.

Launched in 2009, Metris Arts Consulting believes in the power of culture to enrich people's lives and help communities thrive. We believe those benefits should be broadly shared and inclusively developed. Metris seeks to provide high caliber planning, research, and evaluation services to reveal arts' impacts and help communities equitably improve cultural vitality. To accelerate change, we seek to share knowledge and amplify the voices of those closest to the work.

Cover: Mural, titled Ganawenjige Onigam, painted on the side of AICHO's Gimaajii building by artists from NSRGNTS. *Photo by Ivy Vainio*

Design: Sarah Rainwater Design

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THE KRESGE FOUNDATION

The American Indian Community Housing Organization (AICHO) is a Duluth, Minnesota nonprofit organization established in 1993. AICHO grew out of a collective vision of Native American women in the Duluth community who saw a need for having a culturally specific organization to respond to social issues impacting American Indians, such as violence against women, poverty, and homelessness. Today, AICHO is the only provider of culturally specific housing and services in Northeast Minnesota.

Since its inception, AICHO developed a range of programming, including a domestic violence shelter, transitional housing, scattered-site supportive housing, on-site supportive housing, advocacy, and programming designated to arts and culture. Although traditional Native American culture and practices are incorporated in all programs, AICHO serves all persons in need. AICHO's operating philosophy is that every American Indian woman, man and child deserves to live in a safe, non-threatening environment and should be treated with dignity and respect. Our mission is to incorporate indigenous values into all aspects of our work.



AICHO

American Indian Community
Housing Organization

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