



Healthy Kids Healthy Communities

BUILDING HEALTHIER TOMORROWS

Healthy Kids Mescalero Apache

The rural, tribal community of Mescalero envisions multiple generations using a walking trail along the Tularosa Creek, where there will be designated fishing areas, natural playscapes for children and shady oases for adults.

About 90% of the people who live in Mescalero are American Indian. The southeastern New Mexico reservation located in the Sacramento Mountains is home to the Mescalero Apache Tribe; where close to 4,000 members reside near the town of Ruidoso, NM. The mountainous lands support fishing and hiking and Healthy Kids Healthy Mescalero wants to expand those recreational opportunities with a community trail.

Healthy Kids Healthy Mescalero is an initiative supported by Healthy Kids New Mexico that aims to make it easier for families to be physically active and choose healthy food. While the initiative has involved providing nutrition education and fruit and veggie tasting for the children, the majority of the focus is on carefully planning a 1 ½ mile community trail that is endorsed by the Mescalero community.

“I think the largest important piece in any development, particularly for trails, parks and open spaces, is sustainability,” said Attila Bality, outdoor recreation planner for the National Park Service (NPS). “If we’re building a trail in Mescalero and there’s no clear community support behind it, it will quickly become over grown and not maintained.”

Key Community Successes

October 2011 - June 2013

- Partnered with the National Park Service and a transportation planner to develop a sustainable trail along Tularosa Creek
- Conducted health-impact assessment and surveyed community members on proposed 1 ½ mile Tularosa Creek trail plan
- Taught third grade and pre-school children about the importance of eating fruits and vegetables, drinking water and moving more as a part of the 5.2.1.O Challenge
- Provided fresh fruit and vegetable tastings to pre-school children
- Engaged in clean-up and recycling efforts throughout the community

Community transformation in Mescalero Apache has, to date, primarily focused on changes in the built environment via Tularosa Creek trail development. Once complete, the trail will be accessible to all (nearly 4,000) tribal members on the reservation.

Pre-school children and 45 third graders participated in the 5.2.1.O Challenge this past year.

Through the River Trails and Conservation Assistance Program, Bality is helping Tori Marden, coordinator of Healthy Kids Healthy Mescalero, and AmeriCorps volunteers located out of the Mescalero Tribal Fish Hatchery to plan a trail that the community will want to use and maintain over the long-term. Part of that work has involved conducting a health-impact assessment and holding focus group to get community feedback on the proposed trail plan.

In addition to NPS and AmeriCorps, Marden works with Aimee Bennett, a health promotion educator for the Department of Health, to get feedback from the community about how easy it is to walk around in Mescalero and how that can be improved. Bennett said that the assessments help point out the need for a crosswalk installed where the local Mescalero Head Start Program is, and they are now working on that.



AmeriCorps volunteers conduct walkability assessment

“We are more likely to get tribal approval with documented community support,” Bennett said. “The Tribal Council likes to have evidence to back up what we want to do.”

The fun part is imagining an active community of multiple generations using a trail that would connect to other walking routes and pass by Mescalero’s tribal offices and housing. The AmeriCorps volunteers helped arrange a fishing day along the Tularosa Creek to survey people about trail features, surfaces and accessibility.

Marden, a Mescalero native, considers it a success that elderly tribal members and young people have given her ideas and positive comments about the proposed trail. One idea is to have natural play areas along the trail such as rocks for climbing, logs children can crawl through and teepee frames. “People really bought into the idea because of our culture and how as young kids those were things we played with when there were no playgrounds,” she said.

Gleda Little, an administrative secretary, represents Mescalero Indian Health Services (IHS) at the Healthy Kids Healthy Mescalero planning meetings. She said she walks along the local football field when it’s warm and the treadmill in the winter. “Walking along the creek, I think that will be awesome,” Little said. “Maybe it will get more people out there and walking. Being outside is more what people like to do.”

Another piece of the Healthy Kids Healthy Mescalero Initiative is helping children learn about healthy foods. If children can form healthy habits, they are more likely to follow them throughout their lives and influence their families as well. One of Marden’s favorite parts of the initiative is seeing the look on young children’s faces when they try

new fruits and vegetables. Marden went into the Mescalero Child Care facility to do taste testing with the pre-school kids.



“Some of the kids have never tasted some of the fruit or vegetables that we taste tested,” Marden said. “It was nice to get them to talk about what they liked and what won the best flavor of the day. Everybody loved the oranges, the tomatoes and some even wanted a second helping of the dried apricots.”



Marden worked with 45 third graders at Mescalero Apache Elementary School and students at the local Head starts every week for a month for the 5-2-1-0 Challenge that encourages children to eat five servings of fruit and vegetables, decrease TV time and computer screen time, be physically active and drink more water.

She made sure that fun was the central part of the education. They made melon-ball caterpillars, Ants-On-A-Log and apple sailboats. They performed a puppet show about limiting screen time. They danced with the kids for physical activity, played a jeopardy game to remember fruits and vegetables and received pedometers to clock their steps.

Over the past few months Marden along with AmeriCorps volunteers helped gather cardboard from around the reservation. They have also been picking up tin cans and plastics during trash clean up days. In all, they gathered and recycled over 2 tons of cardboard, 1 ton of plastics, 500 pounds of tin cans and 10 tons organic.

“Just over these past few months working in the community and working with the kids has been such a great experience for me; I love it when I would see the kids out in the community and they would ask when we will be back again. It sure makes myself and AmeriCorps members feel good about ourselves,” Marden said.