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COMMUNITY TRANSFORMATIONS

Welcome to the Avenue NACDI creates a new cultural corridor

Bright banners adorn the streetlights along East Franklin Avenue: orange flags bearing a geometric burst of green with white feathers above the words “American Indian Cultural Corridor.” Beside them hang green flags with words less familiar to many who pass along this six-block stretch on the south side of downtown Minneapolis.

“Miigwech Bii'izhaayan” translates to “Thank you for coming” in the Ojibwe language, and “Tanyan yahi ye/ do” means “Nice that you have arrived here” in Dakota.

The green and white floral starburst incorporates artistic elements from those two major tribes whose lands and lives intersect here, where the forest meets the prairie: the Dakota plains Indians and the woodland Ojibwe.

The street banners are the work of the Native American Community Development Institute (NACDI), made possible by funding from the Twin Cities Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC).

The banners and other public art—wall murals, sculpture, ornate bicycle racks and utility boxes bearing photos of pow-wows and contemporary local leaders—are the most visible work of the non-profit, which was created in 2007 to be an economic and cultural catalyst for an urban Native American community that is economically under-represented. NACDI’s mission focuses on four broad economic sectors: Land and Housing, Arts and Culture, Media and Entertainment, and Health and Wellness.

Its list of accomplishments include recruiting Woodlands National Bank, the city’s first American Indian-owned bank, to Franklin Avenue; and an American Indian Arts Festival that drew 8,000 visitors in 2011. Other work includes entrepreneurial training for Native Americans, film and media projects, development assistance around the nearby light-rail-transit corridor, and much more. Much of NACDI’s work is as partner or intermediary for other Native American non-profits and businesses serving the area.



NACDI’s Daniel Yang and one of the art -wrapped utility boxes along the new corridor. For more images of the corridor, check our TC LISC’s new Cultural Corridor [Pinterest](#) board!

Culture and Infrastructure

The building that houses NACDI's offices is itself an example of the organization's approach. Purchased in partnership with the American Indian Community Development Corporation (AICDC), the project was financing by native-owned Woodlands Bank and built by Indian-owned contractors with Indian employees, explains Daniel Yang, community engagement specialist for NACDI. The building is also home to All My Relations art gallery and Ojibwe-owned Pow Wow Grounds coffee shop.

"[The building project] showed that, as Indian organizations, we could partner together and utilize Indian-owned companies," says Yang. He points to the other Native American bricks-and-mortar developments along Franklin: apartments, offices, retail, service centers, tribal offices, and a medical and dental clinic.

While the buildings may be new, the Native American presence is not. "The first Dakota creation stories go back just a number of miles from this actual location," says Yang. The Cultural Corridor celebrates more recent history, as well: one of the six anti-graffiti utility boxes stands at the site of the first American Indian Movement (AIM) office. The box features black-and-white portraits of the early leaders of the movement, founded in 1968. Two or three are regulars at the new coffee shop, Yang notes.

"We know what the community looks like," Yang explains. "We know that Indian people are here. But for it to start to be reflected in the infrastructure, that really creates geographic identity, and belonging, and saying: 'We're not hidden... This is our land, and we're proud to be here, and we're proud of our culture.'"

The Art of the Local Economy

Artist and business-owner Gregg Bellanger's 12-year-old art store, Northland Native American Products, is one of two businesses remaining from an earlier attempt to build an Indian-owned presence at the Ancient Traders Market on Franklin Avenue. Bellanger says NACDI has taken up that cause and is "pushing it ten-fold," and he applauds NACDI's larger focus on "the whole corridor." It's great for business, Bellanger says, because it creates a destination.



Gregg Bellanger in his Northland Native American Products store

"Nobody's going to come down for one thing," he says, "but if you can come down here and see an art gallery, pick up some gifts, grab something to eat, hang out, drink some coffee, maybe listen to some music — that's different."

Bellanger's store, while not a NACDI project, exemplifies the non-profit's mission and the intersection of cultural and economic elements. The bulk of his plains and woodlands art is made by people "from the neighborhood," he says. And 30 percent of his sales come from selling them supplies to make that art. "When you support local people, you support the local economy, and it keeps the art going," Bellanger says.

Even art as simple as a street banner can resonate deeply. Yang relates the story of an Ojibwe woman and her grandson who were walking along the newly designated Cultural Corridor last August. Noticing the Cultural Corridor flags, the boy asked his grandmother what the strange words meant.

"When we listen to songs in Ojibwe, that's what Ojibwe looks like," she told the boy, who speaks only English. After that, the woman and her grandson began attending the weekly Ojibwe Language Table, Yang says.

"She started re-learning, and he was learning," says Yang. "There are a lot of stories like that, of things along the avenue, of opportunities we have to reclaim culture, language, traditions."