SISSETON WAHPETON OYATE

Project Title: Sisseton Wahpeton Arts Store

Award Amount: $403,371

Type of Grant: Social and Economic Development Strategies

Project Period: 9/30/2004 – 9/29/2006

Grantee Type: Tribe

PROJECT SUMMARY

- 2 jobs created
- 34 people trained
- 6 partnerships formed
- 2 Native American consultants hired
- 30 elders involved
- 12 youth involved
- $120,000 in revenue generated
- 1 business created

BACKGROUND

The Sisseton Wahpeton Sioux Tribe governs the Lake Traverse Reservation which spans over 400 square miles. Current tribal enrollment is just over 10,000. The current unemployment rate on Lake Traverse Reservation is approximately 60 percent.

A tribally-sponsored Business Mentorship Program works with tribal members interested in developing home-based arts and crafts businesses. A random-sample survey of these artists revealed the following concerns: a lack of retail outlets for product sales, high staff turnover at existing outlets, which required constant renewal of relationships; favoritism exhibited in buying patterns; inconsistent buying patterns; and the overall lack of marketing activities, which limited product sales and income. This survey was shared with the artists and they supported for the development of a tribally-controlled retail outlet that would focus on the sale of high-quality, authentic arts and crafts.

PROJECT PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

The purpose of Sisseton Wahpeton Arts Store (Project) was to provide hands-on training and education in cultural arts and business skills. The development of a locally-based arts and crafts store would build capacity, using the talents, skills and resources already existing on the reservation.

The Project succesfully opened the Dakota Nation Art and Gift Store in June 2005, overcoming a number of challenges (i.e., management turnover, a change in store location, and severe weather), which delayed its opening. (To address cash flow issues, the Store accepted items on consignment.) The Store sponsored "Artist of the Month" presentations, which became a cornerstone piece. The Project also developed five education seminars including practice-based presentations on beadwork and painting. Each seminar was presented a number of times to native and non-native

community members. The Store surpassed all expectations, attracting a wider range and higher number of native artists and craft producers than originally anticipated. There were over 200 artists involved, surpassing the planned milestone of 112.

While the Project had planned to provide seminars on business skills, copyright and intellectual property rights, trademarks and patents, financial literacy/management, marketing, and advertising, the initial artist response was not encouraging. Instead, the Project developed the curriculum into an artist's handbook. The Project had also planned to feature tribal artisans' products on a web site. A web site placeholder was established, but it did not have the capability to conduct sale transactions.

Despite its success, revenues are insufficient to sustain the Store beyond the funding period. However, a marketing consultant was retained to expand the Store's visibility and income.

PROJECT OUTCOMES AND IMPACT ON COMMUNITIES

For Native American artists in the Sisseton area, the Project had a profound impact. The Store has broadened the visibility and appreciation of native artists in the community. This exposure has also increased their income. The Store's on-going skill development classes and the feedback solicited from artists on the quality of supplies have also served to increase the overall caliber of artist work, further increasing income. Additionally, the presence of a locally-based enterprise ensures that any money spent by the artists on necessary supplies, such as beads, string and fabric, will remain within the community.

The art classes attracted a core group of Native Americans, widening the knowledge of native art techniques, and thereby ensuring the conveyance of native art skills and the on-going revitalization of the Sisseton Wahpeton Sioux culture. Furthermore, class attendees had the opportunity to repair and refurbish traditional Tribal regalia under the watchful eye of experts, allowing these valuable pieces to be preserved. The classes appealed to many non-native locals, enhancing the relationship between the native and non-native communities.

The Project had one unintended benefit a partnership with the local corrections facility. Prisoners with a native arts background receive Store supplies and produce beadwork and artwork, which the store subsequently sells. Finally, the Store has also welcomed native cultural items from community members for consignment, broadening income possibilites.

Mary White-Country, an artist and local college art professor, shared, "Before this Store, there was no local place for supplies. It made teaching difficult, and my lessons were sometimes not interactive or practice-based because it was necessary for me to go to Fargo (1.5 hours by car) for the necessary supplies. With the Store, I have a local supply of materials, and I can now teach art lessons how they were meant to be taught." Another artist, Francis Country, reflected on the impact the Store has had on him personally, and on his fellow community members as a whole, "there was no local place to showcase my art or to buy art supplies. Now there is, which increases every artists' exposure and furthers our ability to educate our community members."