

Native youth suicide: Epidemic affects Tribal communities across the US

By Talli Nauman, Health & Environment Editor, Native Sun News; originally published Aug. 26, 2015

PINE RIDGE VILLAGE, S.D. – Oglala Sioux Tribal member Amanda Carlow brought home new hope and support for survivors of youth suicide when she returned recently from a weeklong symposium for mental health professionals in Oxford, England.

Her presentation at the 2015 Oxford Symposium in School-Based Family Counseling sparked the formation of an international collaborative of counselors, social workers, psychologists and other mental health professionals like herself who want to empower Pine Ridge Indian Reservation youth to rise above suicidal thoughts and feelings, Carlow told the *Native Sun News*.

The presentation was entitled *Open Heart, Open Mind: Working Together to Vanquish Youth Suicide* and it “opened up a lot of eyes,” she said.

“Suicide’s really a sensitive topic and during the presentation there were several other symposium participants who had shed tears. They didn’t know the full impact it plays for Native American youth. Other members of the symposium wanted to know what they could do,” she said.

Suicide is the second leading cause of death for Native American youth in the 15- to 24-year-old age group. That’s 2.5 times the national rate, according to the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, or SAMHSA.

Carlow gave the presentation along with pediatrician Nancy Iverson, director of the PATHSTAR Annual Swim from Alcatraz, in which Carlow participated for the first time in October 2014, making her one of dozens of Native American and Alaska Native health ambassadors in the San Francisco-based organization’s national fitness and nutrition outreach program.

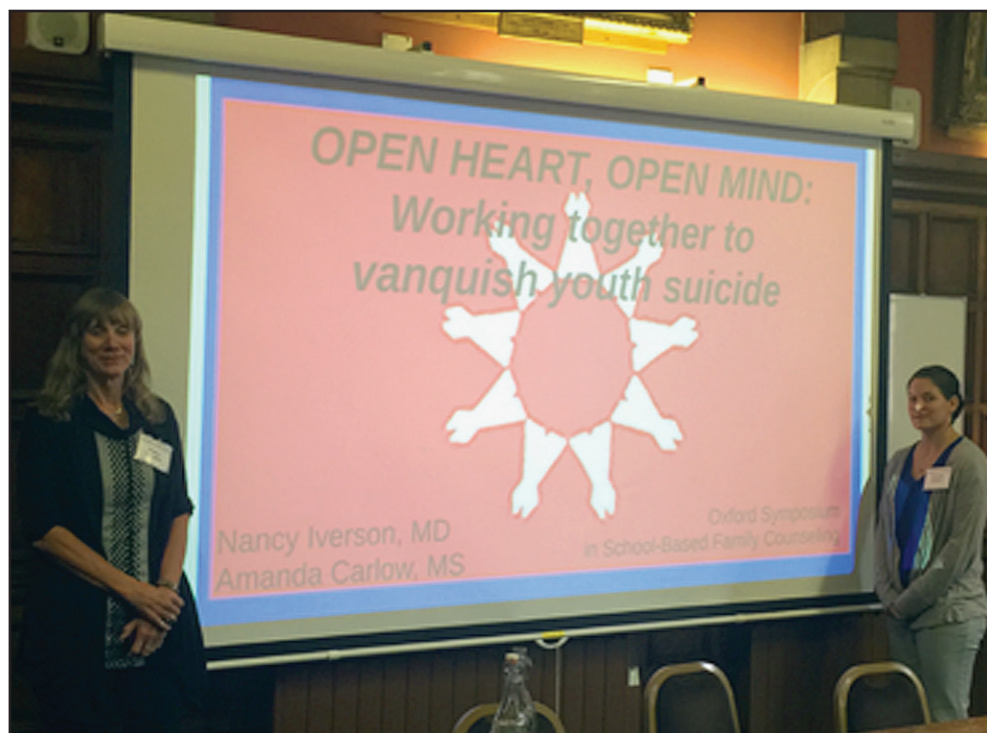
“Originally, it wasn’t the topic we were going to present,” Carlow said. “We were going to present on learning the Lakota language.”

Then a spike in youth suicides occurred on the reservation, with 12 between January and May 2015.

“It was tough to talk about but with everything that happened, I figured it was a topic we could cover,” she said.

No sooner had she arrived in London for the transfer to Oxford when she switched on her mobile telephone to find a voice message about another suicide that had happened back home. Two days later another occurred there.

Participants of the 25-member symposium held a brainstorming session and



Courtesy photo from PATHSTAR

A presentation by pediatrician and PATHSTAR Director Nancy Iverson (l) and Amanda Carlow (r), Red Cloud Indian School guidance counselor, at the Oxford Symposium in School-Based Family Counseling in England triggered the formation of an international team to help combat youth suicides on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation.



Courtesy photo from Team One Spirit/Facebook

Amanda Carlow wears the Oglala Sioux Tribal flag at the 2013 New York City marathon.

asked Carlow to send them information, in order to follow up with conferences and consultation on ways to provide long-term, ongoing professional help, she said.

“One of the hardest things is how the kids are younger and younger each time – 12- and 11-year-olds. Some really bright, intelligent kids are stopping their lives. They are just beginning or just graduated high school. They don’t get to experience that. They take all that away from themselves,” Carlow said.

Most of the recent self-inflicted deaths on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation did not involve suicide notes, she

said. However, research shows that mental disorders or substance abuse are found in 90 percent of people who die of suicide.

Common challenges for most local youth are bullying, cyber-bullying, poverty, drugs, alcohol and sexual abuse, according to Carlow. However, she cautioned, “We will always ask why, but you can’t ever say why they did it because they are gone.”

It’s important to neither glamorize nor sensationalize the suicides, Carlow noted, adding that suicide survivors are not only the youth whose suicides miscarry but everyone else in the community.

“That’s one thing that was talked about at the symposium,” she said. “Everyone is trying to survive.”

In Lakota culture, common watchwords are “We are all related” (Mitakuye Oyasin): “That is one of the reasons if someone takes their life and others can’t really understand it,” she said.

“In our belief, if you take your own life, your spirit just wanders this earth and you don’t go anywhere,” she added.

To help prevent more wandering souls, Carlow, who is a counselor at Red Cloud Indian School, trusts in a multidisciplinary approach. The Lakota language program at the school is one element, she noted.

She coaches high school basketball and middle school cross-country running. However, she said, “Sports may not be for everybody. There are so many different avenues.

“We have to keep giving kids opportunities,” she said. There’s a lot of different ways that we can empower our youth: Through college readiness, life skills and teaching kids to exercise prayer instead of suicide.

“For myself, I really practice our traditional beliefs and ceremony, such as Sundance and things of that nature,” she added. “So I don’t force them but I encourage them, knowing how powerful that is in my life.”

Hers is the most recent of several efforts to focus prevention and healing on at-risk reservation youth, she noted. It involves professionals from Israel, New Zealand, Canada and various U.S. states.

Their collaboration is sponsored by the Institute for School-Based Family Counseling and co-sponsored by the University of San Francisco Center for Child and Family Development. The institute exists to “promote the development of school-based family counseling as a discipline through multi-culturally sensitive programs of both intervention and prevention.” Its 2015 symposium took place at Brasenose College.

The Oxford Symposium in School-Based Family Counseling was made possible in part by a grant from Trust Funds Inc. in San Francisco. However, Carlow had to raise travel expenses herself.

“We had a hard time fundraising to pay for the entire trip, but it was worth going,” Carlow said. “Sometimes I can’t believe the opportunities that I get. I’m really thankful for it.”

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Jewell announces BIA’s largest land-into-trust acquisition for Tribal nations

ISLETA PUEBLO, N.M. – As part of President Obama’s goal of placing half a million acres of Tribal homelands into trust for the benefit of Tribal nations, U.S. Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell announced Jan. 15 that the Bureau of Indian Affairs has placed 89,978 acres of land into trust status for the Pueblo of Isleta.

The administration’s single largest trust acquisition to date brings to nearly 400,000 the total acreage placed in trust

on behalf of federally recognized Tribes since 2009.

Jewell made the historic announcement at a formal signing ceremony in Isleta with Isleta Governor E. Paul Torres, acting Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs Lawrence S. Roberts and U.S. Senator Tom Udall.

As part of Obama’s pledge to work nation-to-nation with Tribal leaders to strengthen their communities and build their economies, this administration has

taken a total of 397,268 acres into trust during the past seven years. That total represents almost 80 percent of the administration’s goal of placing 500,000 acres into trust by the end of the president’s term.

The secretary of the interior is authorized to acquire land in trust for federally-recognized American Indian Tribes through the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934.

Under federal law, lands held in trust for American Indians and Alaska

Natives cannot be sold or transferred to non-American Indians and can benefit from federal programs for business development, housing, environmental and cultural protection.

Typical uses of trust land include governmental operations, cultural activities, agricultural/forestry activities, housing, economic development, social and community services, health care and educational facilities.