

## Tribal Forum 2015

Gary Leslie and Marti Lindsey, PhD

On April 16, 2015 at the Desert Diamond Casino, SWEHSC in collaboration with the Inter Tribal Council of Arizona, Inc. (ITCA), the Ak-Chin Indian Community, the Tohono O'odham Nation, and the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS) hosted an open tribal forum entitled, *Tribal Stories of Health and the Environment: A Tribal Forum to Share How Environmental Exposures Affect the Health of Tribal People* to promote the sharing of stories of health and the environment.

The agenda focused on topics of water, air, climate, and human health, which allowed participants to hear stories of the personal experiences of Native American ambassadors of health in the fields of environmental protection and health care. The one-day event began with a traditional Tohono O'odham blessing from high school students from the Ha:şan Preparatory & Leadership School.

Selso Villegas, PhD, the Water Resources Department director of the Tohono O'odham Nation and Marcelino Flores, a tribal council member of the Pascua Yaqui Nation opened the day's discussion by offering words of consideration regarding the relationship between humans and the environment. One purpose of the forum was to allow tribes to view the SWEHSC as a resource for education and information to promote tribal environmental health. Additionally, the tribal forum demonstrated that SWEHSC and NIEHS stand ready to provide information and serve as a research resource for environmen-

tal health issues. Emerging themes from the tribal forum included the value of indigenous knowledge and the importance of supportive environments, which offer people protection from the factors that can threaten good health, including where they live, where they work and where they play. Additionally, supportive environments can foster participation in health and enable people to expand their capabilities and health self-reliance. Flores shared experiences of how mainstream society is starting to realize the value of indigenous knowledge within the fields of public health and environmental science. Additionally, he spoke about how a supportive environment can prolong human life.

Another theme was having an allegiance to our natural environment Souta Calling Last, from ITCA, explained how her upbringing sparked her commitment to saving the Earth's natural water sources. She shared a personal story of how a sacred bundle of the Blackfoot people has been maintained for centuries. Through that sacred bundle her people share a covenant with all elements of the earth, plants, and the animal kingdom. A call to action to protect Mother Earth was another common theme. Dr. Linda Birnbaum said, "You can't change your genes, but you can change your environment."

Villegas discussed the impacts of climate change and how native people view the Earth Mother as being sick. He urged the audience to become aware of climate change and begin educating our communities on the impact of climate change. Villegas shared how the Tohono O'odham people will address climate change. He used a traditional basket to illustrate the importance of protecting our survival foods in reducing vulnerability of climate change. He added that securing water, traditional foods, and adaptive planning for climate change are important steps in reducing the impact. He concluded his speech by reminding the audience that, "technology can serve us or kill us".

Some closing thoughts included education, outreach, and the need for science translators in the capacity of building and making connections for native peoples. Additional comments about community engagement, including community health workers in further conversations, are important steps towards reducing the gap in environmental health disparities. Finally, continued collaborations and relationship building are key in finding solutions for environmental and human health problems.



2015 Miss Tohono O'odham, Paschynne Suzanne Ignaciao, with NIEHS Director Linda Birnbaum (left) and SWEHSC Directors Serrine Lau (right) and Marti Lindsey (Courtesy by UAHS BioCommunications).