

— conversations on —  
**FOOD JUSTICE**

A series hosted by  
*Share Our Strength and Food & Society at the Aspen Institute*

**SUMMARY TO ACTION REPORT**  
**SESSION #4**

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**SESSION DESCRIPTION**

On April 1<sup>st</sup>, Share Our Strength, in collaboration with Food & Society at the Aspen Institute, hosted the fourth session of **Conversations on Food Justice**, a series examining the roots and evolution of the food justice movement and how it intersects with race and class, as well as health, educational and environmental inequities. “Food Sovereignty: Food and Justice for Native Peoples” featured speakers, Chef Nephi Craig, Sanjay Rawal, and Sam Schimmel, and was moderated by Nikki Pitre. The panel delved into the food sovereignty movement, and how Native communities are challenging the dominant food structures to build systems that are resilient, environmentally sustainable, and centered around the wellbeing of Native people. They also explored the connection between food and cultural identity, and how Native communities are regaining and sharing lost knowledge.

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**FEATURED PANELISTS**

**Chef Nephi Craig, BHT, ACRPS**

Executive Chef at the Rainbow Treatment Center and Café Gozhóó and Nutritional Recovery Program Coordinator



Chef Nephi Craig has 23 years culinary experience in America and around the world in London, Germany, Brazil and Japan. Nephi Craig is an enrolled member of the White Mountain Apache Tribe and is half Navajo. Chef Craig is also the founder of the Native American Culinary Association or NACA, an organization/network that is dedicated to the research, refinement, and development of Native American Cuisine. Chef Nephi Craig provides training, workshops and lecture sessions on Native American Cuisine for health to schools, restaurants, universities, treatment centers, behavioral health agencies, and tribal entities from across America and abroad. Chef Craig recently served as Executive

Chef of the Sunrise Park Resort Hotel. During Chef Craig’s nine-year tenure at Sunrise Park resort, Craig and his White Mountain Apache culinary team achieved many national and international benchmarks in establishing a culture of Indigenous Foods across North America. Connect and follow @nephi\_craig on Instagram.

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**Sam Schimmel**

Youth Advisory Board Member, Center for Native American Youth



Sam is St. Lawrence Island Siberian Yupik and Kenaitze Indian from Alaska. Sam experienced firsthand how Climate Change impacts Arctic communities. Sam was appointed by the Governor of Alaska to serve on the State of Alaska's Climate Action Leadership Team. Schimmel continues to support climate awareness and education as a representative for the National Congress of American Indians Climate Action Task Force. Sam is an Advisory Board Member for the Center for Native American Youth, and is on the Board of Directors for the Arctic Youth Network and was a presenter at the 2020 Arctic Observing Summit. Sam is on the core planning team for the 2020

National Tribal Climate Change Summit. As a 2020/2021 Arctic Youth Ambassador Sam, continues to learn, engage, and educate peers and communities about Arctic issues. Sam was awarded the 2020 Youth Environmental Excellence Award at this year's 2020 Tribal Environmental Leaders Summit. Sam is in his third year at Stanford University focusing on Earth Systems and Public Policy.

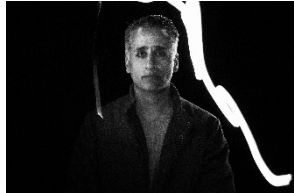
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**Sanjay Rawal**  
Film Director, "Gather"



Sanjay spent 15 years working on human rights campaigns globally - for governments, foundations, philanthropists and celebrities. Sanjay's first feature documentary *Food Chains* (2014), was produced by Eva Longoria and Eric Schlosser with narration by Forest Whitaker. The film won numerous awards, was released theatrically in 40 cities by Screen Media and was acquired by Netflix. Sanjay's second effort took a sharp turn into non-traditional filmmaking. Applying narrative cinematic technique, Sanjay directed a sweeping expedition film. *3100*:

*Run And Become* now on Amazon Prime. Sanjay's work has been supported by Ford, Bertha, BritDoc, Fledgling, 11th Hour Project, NoVo, and the Omidyar Network. His work has won an assortment of honors include a James Beard Media Award. Connect and follow @gatherfilm and @mrsanjayr on Instagram.

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**Nikki Pitre**  
Executive Director, Center for Native American Youth at the Aspen Institute



Nikki's Indian name is *kehwele'* which means Meadow Lark. She is a member of the Coeur d'Alene Tribe and is of the Red Bird Clan. She is also Kalispel, Yakama, Nisqually, Cowlitz, and Squaxin Island. She is a direct descendant of Chief Spokane, Chief Ignace, Chief Kamayakin and Chief Leschi. Nikki takes pride standing on the shoulders of her ancestors, honoring the foundation they have laid and being as a vessel for her grandmothers to uplift the next generation. With a true passion to

support Native youth and youth-led programming, Nikki sits on the Partnership With Native Americans Board of Directors and serves on the Miss Indian World Committee for the Gathering of Nations Pow-wow. Nikki has worked on behalf of her people her whole life. Her biggest inspiration comes from her daughter, *Aplhmarinn'tsu'tn* (Carries the Medicine). Nikki maintains her culture through language, ceremony, powwows and honoring her teachings passed on to her.

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**SUMMARY AND KEY TAKEAWAYS**

*"Food sovereignty is a form of resilience and resistance and honors who we are". - Nikki Pitre*

Few populations are facing as many simultaneous crises as Native communities. The unique challenges they face including the legacy of genocide and colonialism, the proliferation of large-scale, centralized agriculture, discriminatory federal policies, and the worsening impacts of pollution and climate change—have contributed to a food crisis. These issues have been exacerbated because of the COVID pandemic. Access to healthy food is critically low in Native communities and rates of hunger and diet-related health issues like diabetes and childhood obesity are high. Many Native communities hold up food sovereignty as the path forward.

The U.S. Food Sovereignty Alliance explains, "Food sovereignty goes well beyond ensuring that people have enough to meet their physical needs. It asserts that people must claim their power in the food system by rebuilding the relationships between people and the land, and between food providers and those

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who eat.”<sup>1</sup> Access and connection to food are innately important to Native communities. Food, culture, and identity are interwoven in the communities and cannot be separated; food has a deep connection to their landscape and cultures. Panelist Sam Schimmel explained, “Our traditions are intrinsically tied to our food and our foods are intrinsically tied to our traditions. When we don’t have our traditional foods, it poses a barrier to being able to practice traditions and cultural sovereignty.” The foods and traditions are what make them Native. Food and its production are important for Native survival, health, and preservation of customs.

Schimmel, an Alaskan Native, noted that food insecurity in their Alaskan community is not anything new. During COVID, Natives who relied on subsistence hunting and fishing have not been able to gather to do so safely, and have been forced to rely on canned meat and fish from the USDA. He called this “A band-aid on a giant wound.” To support food sovereignty, it is essential to support the traditional Native practices of gathering food. Providing resources such as gasoline or army surplus boats would have allowed the Alaskan Native communities to keep their traditions alive during COVID. Sam Schimmel worked with a team of tribal councils, local fisheries, and volunteers to run an initiative, Operation Fish Drop, to address food insecurities brought on by the pandemic. Salmon, an essential food for Alaskan Natives, was distributed to elders and their families. Giving traditional foods is the best way to address food insecurity. Food commodities often overlook the traditions and cultural elements of food.

The Growing Food Sovereignty in Native Communities impact report notes, “Local food-system control is foundational to reversing years of colonization aimed at the disintegration of cultural and traditional belief systems and dismantling of Native social and economic systems. If Native communities control local food systems, food can become a driver for cultural revitalization, improving community health, and economic development.”<sup>2</sup> Panelist Chef Nephi Craig explained, “...native foods are powerful educators... so many health disparities are linked to lack of land access.” Operation Fish Drop is one example of Native communities reclaiming their traditional foods and cultures. It’s important to remember colonization was based on food. Filmmaker Sanjay Rawal described, “They began funding explorers to take spices by enslaving local people and taking land. Spirit and culture thankfully still exist in colonized communities.” Rawal’s film, *Gather*, examines how Native communities are fighting back against centuries of colonization and genocide to reclaim their cultural identities through food.

Food Sovereignty is essential for restoring the identity, traditions, and health of Native communities. The Indigenous experience is diverse and vast, and Indigenous people have the knowledge to best remedy the solutions in their area. It’s crucial to find a way to continue to support these communities and let them drive their own narratives.

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### RESOURCES

Report: [The Impact of COVID-19 on Indigenous People](#)



*One of the most pressing contemporary issues facing all communities of color, including Native peoples, is the COVID-19 pandemic. We have known that COVID-19 is exacerbating existing inequities across the country—the Indigenous Futures Survey has revealed just how devastating the pandemic has been for Indigenous communities. The results of the survey revealed that Indigenous households earning less than \$45,000 a year were hardest hit by the pandemic. In addition to negative health-related outcomes, they were more likely to report inadequate access to PPE and adverse impacts on financials, employment,*

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<sup>1</sup> Food sovereignty. (n.d.). Retrieved April 02, 2021, from <http://usfoodsovereigntyalliance.org/what-is-food-sovereignty/>

<sup>2</sup> Seeds of Native Health & First Nations Development Institute. (2017). *Growing Food Sovereignty in Native Communities: Impact Report 2015–2016*. <https://www.firstnations.org/publications/growing-food-sovereignty-in-native-communities-impact-report-2015-2016/>

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*and wellbeing, compared to participants with higher household incomes. Individuals living in rural areas and those identifying as transgender or gender nonconforming are also reeling from the impact of the pandemic, reporting high rates of job loss, worsening financial circumstances and high levels of stress and depression.*

Article: [Operation Fish Drop](#)



*In a typical year, most Alaska Natives would have been able to subsistence fish themselves, carrying on an age-old tradition and ensuring they had substantial food supplies for the winter. But many families were unable to do so this past fishing season due to constraints from COVID-19 -- making the prevention of a key Alaska Native cultural practice another unintended consequence of the pandemic.*

Film: [Gather](#)



*Gather is an intimate portrait of the growing movement amongst Native Americans to reclaim their spiritual, political and cultural identities through food sovereignty, while battling the trauma of centuries of genocide.*

Report: [Growing Food Sovereignty in Native Communities: Impact Report 2015-2016](#)



*This report illustrates the significantly positive impact that First Nations Development Institute's work has had on Native American communities under First Nations' participation in the Shakopee Mdewakanton Sioux Community's (SMSC) Seeds of Native Health campaign during its first two years. First Nations was the largest of the SMSC's inaugural partners in the campaign.*

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### CALL TO ACTION LIST

*"Support others. Be aware of the saviorism complex. We know how to best remedy the solutions we face in Indian country—the indigenous experience is diverse and vast." - Chef Nephi Craig*

People often ask, what is the next step? If there is a right way to take the step, or if there is a formula. There is not, but we can all do something. Individual actions suggested by the panelists include the following:

- Support Native Youth! Uplift their ideas in your communities. Give them the freedom to have ideas and fund those programs from a bottom up approach.
- Amplify Indigenous voices! Ask what they want and need. Use your privilege and power to elevate Native voices and put them in leadership.
- Educate yourself! Look up Native tribes in your area, study past works that articulate Indigenous experiences, and buy from Native food producers and artists.

We hope you will continue the conversations in your organizations and in your community! Please do not hesitate to let us know how you are keeping the conversations going or if you have thoughts or topics you would like to hear in the future. Reach out to us at [foodjustice@strength.org](mailto:foodjustice@strength.org) Learn more about the initiative and upcoming sessions at <https://www.shareourstrength.org/program/food-justice-series>

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**Share Our Strength** is ending hunger and poverty – in the United States and abroad. Through proven, effective campaigns like No Kid Hungry and Cooking Matters, we connect people who care to ideas that work.

<https://www.shareourstrength.org>



**Food & Society** at the Aspen Institute brings together public health leaders, policymakers, researchers, farmers, chefs, food makers, and entrepreneurs to find practical solutions to food system challenges and inequities. The common goal is to help people of all income levels eat better and more healthful diets—and to enjoy them bite by bite.

<https://www.aspeninstitute.org/programs/food-and-society-program/>