

“What I knew about my Native heritage was what I learned in school: basically, Native Americans were here; then the Gold Rush came,” says Austin Arista, 18, a Konkow Maidu who grew up in the Sierra Nevada foothills. Unfortunately, Austin’s experience of being disconnected from his traditional culture is a common one. In turn, Native cultures and their associated environments become more vulnerable as Native youth do not learn how and why to sustain them.

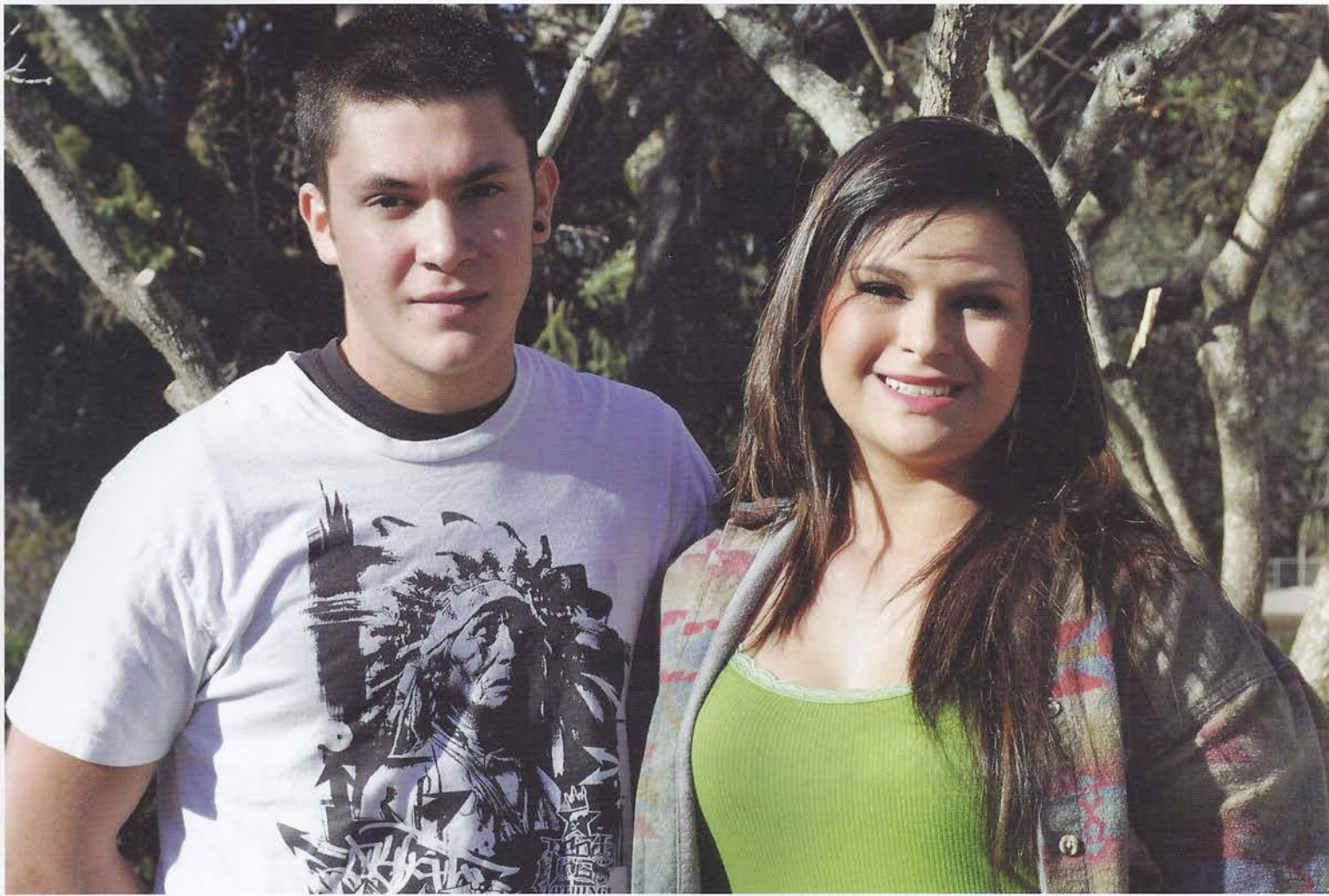
An Honor to Know My Culture

Connecting Native Youth
to Their Culture through
Outdoor Experiences

Text and photos by Mary Adelzadeh

Austin proudly shows off Sierra Native Alliance’s trail restoration project from the previous summer: “Removing Himalayan blackberries, a non-native species, was hard work, but we got through it.” The youth also created an app that shares the Maidu names and uses of native plants found along the trail, an initiative that the youth took on themselves.





Lindsay and Austin Arista enjoyed spending time with each other during the program. “Through high school we grew apart, this program allowed us to reconnect.”

Fortunately, Austin and his sister Lindsay did develop a connection to their Maidu culture through an outdoor youth program offered by Sierra Native Alliance. As a result, they are now committed to being stewards of their culture as well as their environment. Sierra Native Alliance is a non-profit organization with a mission to empower Native youth and families through education, cultural resources, and environmental activities. Based in Auburn, the organization offers an outdoor program to help youth revive and nurture their cultural connections with the land, environment, and community, while supporting a holistic development into adulthood. The program offers an array of outdoor activities, from traditional practices such as crafting bows and arrows and gathering plants, to modern activities such as white-water rafting.

Respecting Native traditions of community involvement, the program involves elders and younger children. The Native teens learn from their elders and are then responsible for teaching this knowledge to younger children. Opportunities to speak to community members in an open forum drew Lindsay out of her shell. She says that

previously, she lacked the confidence to speak in front of groups or introduce herself to new people. Now, Lindsay realizes the importance of connecting with others to share her knowledge—she proudly states, “I will talk to anyone who will listen.” Austin also emphasizes the importance of sharing cultural knowledge, adding, “It is now my responsibility to teach this cultural knowledge to my children.”

There is no doubt that the program has nurtured a cultural and spiritual connection—sparking an interest to learn more about their culture, language, and environment. Both are now enrolled in Maidu language classes. But what does the future hold for Austin and Lindsay? This summer Austin will return to the program as a project leader. He looks forward to implementing the next environmental stewardship project and learning even more about his Maidu culture. He also plans to attend college to earn a degree in marine biology. For Lindsay, she plans to continue her education and remain connected to the program by taking language classes and mentoring younger children.

“It is an honor to know your culture”—Austin Arista

Across California, there are outdoor youth programs that share a similar goal—to prepare the next generation of Native American leaders. And there is need for more outdoor programs, but unfortunately resources are limited. In response to this need, last year the Foundation for Youth Investment (FYI) partnered with the Native American Health Center’s Youth Services Program to host a gathering for Native American youth providers in Sacramento, with funding from TogetherGreen, a conservation initiative funded by Audubon and Toyota.

FYI is a grantmaking organization that develops and transforms the lives of underserved youth by investing in effective programs and creating strategic initiatives that connect young people to the great outdoors. As an advocate for positive growth and change in the outdoor field, FYI provided support for the Native American gathering in the hopes that the information generated would be shared with other practitioners working with Native youth.

The primary purpose of the gathering was to discuss best practices for Native American outdoor youth programs, and to have a dialogue on the opportunities and challenges facing Native outdoor youth programs. During the gathering, Native youth providers emphasized the importance of culture, not as one component of a program, but as the framework for an entire program: What would such a program look like? What are best practices that should be considered in implementing such a program? How can Native youth providers develop and sustain these programs? Will these efforts foster the next generation of leaders that will work to protect ancestral lands and cultural resources? The conversations were rich in knowledge and wisdom, but the participants agreed that these meetings were not enough. They want more opportunities to engage with other outdoor youth providers, which is key to helping more youth.

In response, a network of Native American youth providers is being established to continue the conversation and to provide a network for sharing the common knowledge and wisdom. The network will connect Native expertise and skills throughout California and help support and sustain outdoor programs for Native youth. Members of the network will bring a wealth of cultural knowledge and years of experience serving Native youth in the outdoors. The network will

be available to enhance and sustain outdoor youth programs for Native youth throughout California. We welcome your input and involvement in these efforts. For more information, please contact Mary Adelzadeh, TogetherGreen Fellow, at (530) 305-7874. ▼

Mary Adelzadeh is Diné from the Big Water Clan (Tótsohnii). Mary is originally from Northern Arizona, but currently resides in Davis, California, with her husband and beautiful son where they enjoy outdoor activities and support community-based research and environmental education

Mary has extensive experience working with tribal, federal, and state governments, as well as non-governmental organizations. As a land conservation specialist for the Stewardship Council, she works to preserve and enhance private land throughout California for diverse public benefits. In addition, as an Audubon TogetherGreen fellow, she is working with Native American youth providers to strengthen outdoor programs that promote culture, conservation, and leadership among Native American youth.

JOIN THE NETWORK

We invite you to join a California network of Native American outdoor youth providers if you are involved or interested in leading, administering, or funding outdoor programs for Native youth. The network is being developed in response to feedback from the Native community, and with funding support from the Foundation for Youth Investment and TogetherGreen. The network will help promote and sustain culturally-relevant outdoor programs for Native youth by helping to develop and provide trainings, tools, and networking opportunities. We hope you will join in this opportunity. For more information, please contact Mary Adelzadeh, TogetherGreen Fellow, at (530) 305-7874.