

# FRESH TRACKS 2020: A cross-cultural youth-led revolution anchored in the healing power of culture and the outdoors



## OUR VISION:

Fresh Tracks seeks to advance social and environmental justice, and address hate and racism, by providing diverse young Indigenous, rural and urban leaders with cross-cultural leadership development and civic action training in the outdoors, followed by ongoing financial support and technical assistance to support their community actions.

# DEAR FRESH TRACKS COMMUNITY,

First, I hope that when you read this, it finds you safe, healthy, and managing these times as best you can. The year 2020 will be an unforgettable moment in our shared memory. We learned about COVID-19, adjusted as our reality seemed to change hourly, and constantly assessed how it impacted our loved ones, communities, and daily lives.

Grocery shopping, work, and childcare changed overnight. Looking out for the health and security of our loved ones became the top priority.

One of the things that remained constant was community, and we continued to seed hope rooted in action. Even as we washed our hands and practiced social distancing, we remained connected and found ways to support each other and strengthen our shared ties. As we leaned into these connections, our ability as individuals to carry this heightened load grew. For Fresh Tracks, our movement leaders continued to be the core of our programming, a network radiating energy and connection felt beyond physical distance. This past year reaffirmed our commitment to continue updating the living definition of wellbeing and resilience through culture, a connection to the outdoors, and action.

We opened up support to the Fresh Tracks community to stay connected to each other during this time. Fresh Tracks leaders organized a resource library to navigate the impacts of COVID-19. We hosted workshops and webinars focused on healing and wellbeing, and launched the first phase of the Youth and Young Adult Wellbeing project. The work of Fresh Tracks was highlighted by partners as a way to increase opportunities for young people of color to reach their full potential. Above all, the Fresh Tracks network continued to grow, welcoming new members into the community. We also officially joined The Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions. 2020 was not programmed or scripted, and our projected agenda of activities was erased almost overnight. What remained was a space of connection and support: a place to react, reflect, and share resources to collectively cope with challenges and seize opportunities.

We see hope on the horizon with the distribution of the vaccine for COVID-19. However, we know that some of the communities most impacted by systems of inequity prior to COVID-19 will now be challenged with rebuilding and healing. What stands out for me the most are the voices of resilience that each one of the Fresh Tracks leaders bring forward. Because of them, Fresh Tracks continues to build on a shared legacy and vision.

When I think about the day-to-day challenges that leaders are facing and the ability to overcome, Vin Scully sums it up best:

**“In a year that has been so improbable, the impossible has happened!”**

We are forever grateful to our partners, supporters, champions, and leaders who keep making the impossible a reality. As we move into the new year, we’re excited to share more about where we’ve been and where we’re heading—together.

Thank you,

Juan Martinez, Fresh Tracks Director

# YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULT WELLBEING

In October of 2020 we launched the first phase of the youth and young adult wellbeing project in partnership with the Annie E. Casey Foundation. This project centers and uplifts youth as the leadership and experts of wellbeing. Time and time again, youth and young adults (Y/YA) tell us, “I am more than the worst thing that ever happened to me.” In response, we propose the support of innovative well-being and healing measures developed by Y/YA of color that incorporate their lived experiences through a participatory action research process.

The measures seek to standardize data that identify how culture, values and circumstances nurture the well-being of Y/YA of color and provide a framework for investing in their social, emotional and physical well-being. Well-being measures will be developed for each of the following cultural identity groups: American Indian/Alaska Native (AIAN), African American/Black (AA/B), and Latinx. The measures will likely include multiple domains (Relationships, Peers, Family, Community, Spirituality, Health, Belonging, Safety, etc.). Within each domain will be examples of well-being that Y/YA themselves define. The measures will be available in an open source mobile app format. Summary data from the measures provide end-users valuable information about the strengths and needs of Y/YA of color in their community. End-users include youth-led advocacy groups, tribal councils, neighborhood advocacy groups, community-based service providers, schools, youth-serving networks, developers of evidence-informed programs, funders and even public systems like juvenile probation or foster care.

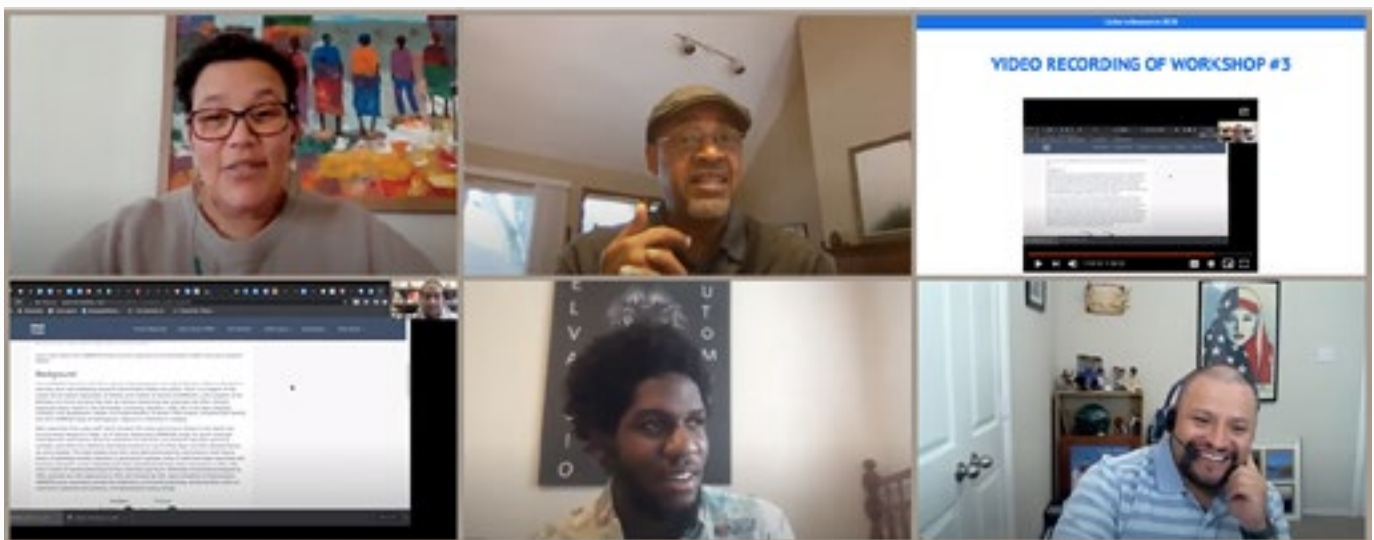
The Project hosted the first round of workshops on Youth-Led Participatory Action Research presented by the Network for Development of Children of African Descent (NdCAD). The workshop series covered subject matters ranging from research and culture, Indigenous knowledge and knowledge systems, Youth-led Participatory Action Research (YPAR) as a methodology, and understanding and using power. Videos of the workshop series can be found in our placeholder [\*\*website\*\*](#).

# THE HEALING POWER OF CULTURE & NATURE AND COVID-19 RECOVERY

In 2020 we faced challenges as a society unlike any other time.

## RESILIENCE

is the word that comes to mind when we think about the leadership of the Fresh Tracks youth.



The Fresh Tracks partners - The Aspen Forum for Community Solutions, Native Americans in Philanthropy, and Children & Nature Network - made significant impact in 2020, supporting the Fresh Tracks network of youth and young adults through the Covid-19 pandemic, providing peer to peer mentorship and technical assistance as they deepened implementation efforts, hosting a leadership roundtable, and establishing the Fresh Tracks Advisory Council.

Technical assistance for the Fresh Tracks network ranged from internal education and network development (creation of the Fresh Tracks youth advisory council and recruitment for leader participation in the Wellbeing Research Series) to external products like a webinar (**Indigenous Ways of Knowing and COVID Recovery with Nature's Healing Power**) and research digest produced by C&NN to highlight the expertise of the Fresh Tracks leaders and network.

Fresh Tracks leaders like Carina Cisneros and James King, Jr. have also had an impact with their place-based expertise, working in consultation on the development of the Youth Development and Nature resources and tools. This work included participation in monthly calls as well as co-facilitation of meetings of community organizations, strategizing for collaboration, and planning cohort engagement.

# FRESH TRACKS IN ACTION

We are thrilled to introduce the inaugural Fresh Tracks Youth Advisory Council! This group of leaders is dedicated to informing, advising, and empowering the next generation of Fresh Tracks leaders and supporting the network of movement leaders present within the Fresh Tracks Network.



**TRENTON CASILLAS-BAKEBERG  
CHEYENNE RIVER SIOUX TRIBE, FRESH TRACKS  
LEADER '17, FRESH TRACKS TRAINER '18,  
GENERATION INDIGENOUS AMBASSADOR**

Trenton is a member of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe and co-founder of the One Mind Youth Movement, a group formed in response to youth suicide clusters on the reservation. The group mobilized to oppose environmental threats like the Keystone XL Pipeline, and later formed one of the first camps at Standing Rock in protest of the Dakota Access Pipeline. Trenton is currently working with his tribal government to establish a drug and alcohol free safe housing program in his community to support reservation youth in crisis. He is currently supporting tribal government's response to COVID-19 and protecting his community by serving on border patrol. He is also a musical artist using the power of song to heal and tell the story of his life and people.



**DEVIN D. EDWARDS  
FRESH TRACKS LEADER '17, FRESH TRACKS  
TRAINER '18, MY BROTHER'S KEEPER BOSTON**

Devin is currently working as a Legislative Aide for State Representative Russell Holmes of Massachusetts and is a My Brother's Keeper Boston Advisory Board Member and former Health and Human Services Executive Assistant. He was born and raised in the South End neighborhood of Boston. Devin attended Cristo Rey Boston High School and now attends Bunker Hill Community College, majoring in Human Services. His passion is to bring his community's voice with him daily to his work. He's grown up in communities heavily impacted by systemic oppression and through his experience and work will aim to make a difference.

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**KIMBERLY PIKOK**  
**FRESH TRACKS LEADER '16,**  
**FRESH TRACKS TRAINER '17 AND '18**

Kimberly Kivvaq Pikok is an Iñupiaq from Utqiagvik, Alaska. She is a senior at the University of Alaska Fairbanks studying Wildlife Biology and Conservation. Kimberly has many interests, and is passionate about learning how climate change impacts animal health and behavior. After graduation, she sees herself furthering her education and pursuing a degree in environmental education so she can work with her community and inspire and encourage Native youth to pursue a career in the sciences. Since 2016, she has been involved in the Fresh Tracks program. In the summer of 2019, Kimberly was a Haskell Environmental Research Studies (HERS) intern at Haskell Indian Nations University.



**JAREN SAVAGE**  
**FRESH TRACKS LEADER,**  
**MY BROTHER'S KEEPER COMPTON**

Mentor, advocate, student, teacher, and entrepreneur—Jaren, born and raised in Compton, California is committed to empowering young leaders, as well as his community by giving back to others. A Compton My Brother's Keeper Leader, Jaren served as a member of the 2019 National Obama Foundation, MBK Summit Planning Committee, assisting with programming, logistics, and facilitation as a peer mentor. He partners with the Center for Native American Youth at the Aspen Institute, Obama Foundation, and the Aspen Institute's Fresh Tracks program as a youth leader and photojournalist.

# OPPORTUNITY YOUTH FORUM CONVENING

The convenings of the Opportunity Youth Forum (OYF) are a twice yearly highlight for members of our network. For 2020, The Opportunity Youth Forum designed and launched a virtual national learning community of grantee partners. This learning community engaged Opportunity Youth Forum site leads, youth leaders, funders, thought partners, and national leaders across many sectors in order to promote learning in a local context, lift up promising local practices of connection, and highlight national innovations and movement-building efforts. This year, Fresh Tracks hosted two sessions at the OYF convening.

## **Session 1:**

### **Advancing racial and social equity through the healing power of the outdoors.**

When community engagement is connected to practices that promote self-care, well-being, and the culture of individuals and communities, the process is much more restorative and healing. The healing power of the outdoors to empower a rising generation of young and diverse leadership cannot be understated as a healing centered strategy. This panel included Ben Steele, REI Co-Op's Chief Customer Officer; Devin Edward from My Brothers Keeper Boston and a Fresh Tracks leader; Monique Miles, Deputy Director of The Aspen Institute's Forum for Community Solutions; and Juan Martinez, Senior Fellow at The Aspen Institute and Director of Fresh Tracks. The panel addressed the nation's COVID-19 response, the role of race in equitable access to the outdoors, and how the pandemic has exposed deep systemic inequities in our nation. It discussed how COVID-19 serves as a catalyst for social change and how we think about domestic policy and recovery in the years ahead, centering building a more equitable future for all Americans that celebrates our connection to each other and the outdoors.

## **Session 2:**

### **Youth led civic engagement: Why it matters to democracy, society, and you.**

Civic engagement and youth-led change are central pillars to movement building. The COVID-19 pandemic might completely erase the past decade's progress by Opportunity Youth and more, bringing the youth disconnection rate to 1 in 5, or even 1 in 4, young people. Young people have the right to represent their own interests, identify their challenges, and design their own solutions to our communities' most pressing challenges. Panelists included Marlen Mendoza, President of League of United Latin American Citizens -LULAC Council 308 in Iowa City; Lexie James, Youth Liaison at The Hopi Foundation, Qa'owungwa (Corn Clan) Tewa Village; Jaren Savage, Fresh Tracks, My Brother's Keeper Compton; Kim Pham, Opportunity Youth United Engagement Coordinator; and Juan Martinez; Senior Fellow at The Aspen Institute and Director of Fresh Tracks. The panel addressed how we work to ensure that youth-led change is centered at the core of the Opportunity Youth movement and democracy. It also underscored that the sustainability of the work is secured by developing pathways of engaged, diverse young organizers who can lead this work for future generations.



# SILO-BREAKING FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE, EQUITY AND OUTDOORS NETWORK

Across our nation, young leaders of color have taken to the streets to call on America to reckon with itself about race. These organizers come from communities that have struggled with generations of trauma and oppression, resulting in deep inequities in their everyday lives and a lack of opportunity. We are in a unique moment when much of America seems to be listening, and the broader public is showing new political will to transform the very systems that underlie these inequities, laid bare by the COVID-19 crisis. **If we are to achieve major systems change, we must also challenge ourselves to rethink our siloed approaches to our work.**

**We believe the outdoor environment has the power to play a much stronger role in systems change through policy.** The outdoor world is inextricable from the emotional, mental, and physical wellbeing of individuals and the overall health of communities. It's also linked to job and education pathway creation to address climate change through innovative solutions. Research shows what we have always known—nature has the power to heal; it's good for our health; and it's a space free of judgment and oppression.

**For all of these reasons, we should be integrating outdoor strategies into youth organizing, leadership, and education programming.**

At the same time, we need to challenge the outdoor and environmental education sectors to make equity a true priority and provide them with the tools to invest in inclusive solutions with systems change and policy goals. To do this, we also need to strengthen pathways for more diverse leadership in these sectors that reflects the experiences of people of color and other marginalized communities.

**A new coalition is emerging, The Outdoor Equity Network, to build a movement for equity, policy, and systems change strategies rooted in the healing power of the outdoors and culture.** The Outdoor Equity Network is composed of diverse youth leaders, equity and environmental funders, and innovative organizational partners across the country. This network first met in Aspen during the Opportunity Youth Forum convening in October 2019. Our goal is to learn together from the programs that are doing this work and develop a theory of change and policy at the federal and state level that will help scale this work. Because of our cultural and traditional knowledge in this area, we also believe it is crucial to center Indigenous leadership.

# EVIDENCE, EVALUATION, AND RESEARCH

In 2020, Fresh Tracks was highlighted as a key program by movement building stakeholders The Urban Institute and The Blue Sky Funders Forum.

## **The Urban Institute: Exploring Approaches to Increase Economic Opportunity for Young Men of Color, A 10-Year Review**

The past decade has brought significant developments in the scope and scale of effort to close equity gaps for young men of color, but additional progress must still be made. This report aims to advance the national dialogue on how to increase economic opportunity for young men of color between the ages of 16 and 24, an important time for development and skill-building. Fresh Tracks was featured as a promising program to increase and empower young men of color to lead: “Empowerment is key to the three facets of economic opportunity set forth at the beginning of this report: its existence, the ability to take advantage of it, and the possibility of achieving the outcomes it promises. Increasing the level of autonomy and self-determination that young men of color have over their lives and communities is critical to ensuring that they can influence the quality, accessibility, and fairness of the systems and institutions that determine economic opportunity. And the presence of people of color at all leadership levels is closely tied to economic opportunity. Research shows that Black children have substantially better academic outcomes when they have Black teachers, and that these effects are larger for boys than for girls (Gershenson et al. 2018). This finding suggests the importance of the role model effect and can be instructive for delivering other services to young men of color. Additionally, leadership or supervisory jobs tend to pay higher wages, provide better benefits, and offer more possibility for upward mobility. Finally, when people of color have hiring power, it increases the chances of people of color being hired into good jobs (Stoll, Raphael, and Holzer 2001).” You can read the full report [HERE](#).

## **Blue Sky Funders Forum: Sharing Hope, Deepening Connections, Aligning Action. A Just Future for People and Nature**

The Blue Sky Funders Forum is a national collaborative that helps members learn, connect, and grow philanthropy that supports the many benefits of environmental literacy and stronger connections to nature. We are a community united in the belief that when people have meaningful experiences outdoors, their quality of life, health and social wellbeing improve, and in turn, their communities become stronger and more sustainable. Being prepared for the future requires all of us to understand the consequences of how we live on where we live – the connection between people and nature. Blue Sky brings supporters of this work together to learn from one another and to strategize how to scale up the impact of the effective programs that transform how people experience their surroundings. By making these essential learning opportunities more accessible, we grow and strengthen the constituency that makes well-informed choices, balancing the needs of today with the needs of future generations. The Blue Sky community came alive in new and compelling ways at the 2020 Virtual Convening on September 8, 9, and 10. Fresh Tracks Director Juan Martinez presented to convening participants on a field scan of practices and strategies that center racial equity. Access the full report [HERE](#).

# LOOKING AHEAD: OUR PATH IN 2021

For 2021, Fresh Tracks envisions a world in which our network of movement leaders is working to advance social and environmental justice and overcome hate and racism. We will continue to provide young Indigenous, rural, and urban leaders with cross-cultural community building skills, leadership development training, civic engagement opportunities, and resources for innovative youth and community-led action. A movement grounded in the healing power of nature and culture, Fresh Tracks is a lifelong journey of leadership, growth, and community action. Elevating youth narratives, power, and vision will continue to be at the core of our work.

## IN 2021, FRESH TRACKS AIMS TO:

Create a national network of Fresh Tracks youth movement leaders working to create systems shifts to improve youth civic engagement, wellbeing, and youth and young adult wellbeing life outcomes through cross-sector collaboration.

Highlight the power of the outdoors to create shared experiences and community that produces leadership development, civic engagement, and cultural competency for positive social change.

Build the national evidence base and drive adoption of Indigenous valued knowledge, intergenerational collaboration, and digital platforms that have the potential to shift outcomes at greater scale; support communities to access and build data and evidence to understand “what works.”

Partner with Fresh Tracks youth movement leaders to identify a policy agenda that directly creates equitable access to decision-making power structures in their communities.

Co-lead with philanthropic partners a platform for 21st century change, driven by youth and community power building strategies with the funds to match scaling of national strategies; support movement leaders to make a compelling business case for investment.

Through a silo-breaking strategy for systems change approach, engage Fresh Tracks youth movement leaders to highlight and co-design solutions in their communities. Fresh Tracks will seek to reshape an asset-based framing of this generation.

# IN GRATITUDE

Fresh Tracks is a multi-stakeholder initiative anchored by the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions with partners Native Americans in Philanthropy, Children & Nature Network, My Brother's Keeper Alliance, and the Opportunity Youth Forum. Since time immemorial, Native communities across the Americas have demonstrated resilience and resistance in the face of violent efforts to separate them from their land, culture, and each other. Indigenous people remain at the forefront of movements for justice, equity, the protection of nature and the life it sustains. Fresh Tracks is aware that we walk, support, and work on Native land. Native American communities continue to thrive and lead the movements for human rights today. The Fresh Tracks team acknowledges the critical and necessary step of honoring Native communities and their leadership in order to build an equitable future for all. Fresh Tracks encourages all to uncover truths of the original inhabitants of the land we all walk on.

This work is made possible with the support of our partners at The REI Co-Op, JPB Foundation, The Annie E. Casey Foundation, The Arthur M. Blank Foundation, Newman's Own Foundation, the Andrus Family Fund, the National Recreation Foundation, and our network of youth and young adult Fresh Tracks leaders across the country who make Fresh Tracks a community of action and positive change.

**Thank you!**

