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PHOTO BY GABRIEL PIETRORAZIO

A series of Indigenous-inspired painting murals that line the chain link fencing surrounding the First Nations Garden Chicago, created by artist David Bernie of the Yankton Sioux Tribe, explores the interconnected struggles of BIPOC communities and their relationship to the city's land. (Photo by Gabriel Pietrorazio)

From A Vacant, City-Owned Lot To Chicago's First Indigenous Garden

STORY BY
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When the City of Chicago entrusted a 15,625-square-foot vacant lot into the hands of urban Native youth and their head auntie Janie Pochel, she feared that their goal to open the city's first Indigenous garden might never take root.

The land they steward, still in the city's custody, on the corner of North Pulaski Road and West Wilson Avenue in the northwestern Chicago neighborhood of Albany Park, was an eyesore before they arrived.

Members of the [Chi-Nations Youth Council](#) (CNYC) worked tirelessly to clear the property of debris in the fall of 2018, months before the [First Nations Garden](#)'s grand opening by next spring. They believed it was an obligation to pass on tribal and inter-tribal knowledge and traditions to the next generation — and to heal the land that their ancestors thrived on a few centuries ago.

"It's still a fight," says Pochel, who is First Nations Oji-Cree and serves as CNYC's lead advisor. "People tried to take the land from us."

Eventually, they were able to transform the empty, standard five-city lot into more than just a garden. It's now a safe space, a new home for Chicago's urban Native youth who feel lost and alienated.

It wasn't a luxury she grew up with during her childhood in Chicagoland either. Guaranteeing that the next generation of urban Native youth may have a happy, healthy environment full of good energy fuels her passion for spending 20 to 30 hours in the garden on any given week.

Today, there are 75 raised garden beds, cultivating more than 150 varieties of fruits, vegetables, herbs and medicines, as well as a climate-control seed library.

Even a few years after the initial cleanup, they are still physically healing the land and spiritually and socially tending to their community while honoring the original Native Chicagoans.

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Janie Pochel of the First Nations Oji-Cree, a co-founder of the Chi-Nations Youth Council, stands in the First Nations Garden and shows off the tattoos on her forearms. One tattoo is of the youth group's logo; another depicts the Chicago flag with the words "Land Back" written inside its folds. (Photo by Gabriel Pietrorazio)

Although the space now looks visually attractive, the soil beneath the surface scared Pochel with its toxic legacy.

The city's soil is 11 times higher, on average, than the natural level of lead, according to [a March study](#) conducted by University of Illinois researchers. About 20% of the city's soil has tested above 400 parts per million (ppm), and some South Side neighborhoods have even clocked in lead levels surpassing 1,000 ppm.

The city's Indigenous youth have planted tobacco and sunflowers along a chain link fence marking the lot's perimeter to absorb hazardous contaminants, including chemicals and heavy metals, through a biochemical process called [phytoremediation](#).

Healing the soil is a necessary next step to secure the future of this five-city standard lot that has undergone a metamorphosis in three short years.

Ben Helphand, executive director at [NeighborSpace](#), a Chicago nonprofit urban land trust, has been collaborating with CNYC to purchase that property, which would be added to the land trust's portfolio of 134 protected gardens citywide.

"NeighborSpace's goal is to secure this land forever so the First Nations Garden will never have to worry about being displaced," Helphand says.

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partnership with land trusts in both rural and urban settings. In California's East Bay, for example, the intertribal women-led [Sogorea Te Land Trust](#) is [working to acquire](#) and [rematriate](#) stolen land.



ð Sogorea Te' Land Trust's community garden in Oakland. (Photo by Oscar Perry ello)

Helphand hopes the property may enter their possession sometime next year after the Illinois Environmental Property Agency reviews the property, which once housed a printing press and could have contributed to the soil contamination that CNYC is now treating.

Although the First Nation Garden also aims to tackle the effects of climate change in the Windy City, those ambitious grassroots efforts began almost a decade before CNYC ever gained a permanent space to call their own. Through “guerilla gardening,” as Pochel puts it, CNYC built satellite gardens in the backyards of Chicagoans wherever they could get permission, simply squeezing them into the urban landscape.

They developed a vast network of more than 100 guerilla gardens citywide. Some of them will serve as homes to Native prairie plantings, which are being grown in their nursery — a dedicated spot inside the First Nations

Garden for its own small grasslands.

“A prairie of this size in a couple years, it’s gonna eat as much as a full tree,” Pochel says.

Regrowing patches of Native prairies and grasslands that once dominated the early Midwest can cut down the city’s carbon footprint, she adds. Soil-based carbon sequestration pulls emissions from the sky, storing them in the earth.

“We want it to be an environment for our Native plants,” Pochel says. “We’re not going to put plants out there that aren’t going to be able to handle the stress of living right here.”

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Today, the First Nations Garden has built 75 community beds, growing more than 150 Indigenous seed varieties since breaking ground three years ago. (Photo by Gabriel Pietrorazio)

An enduring struggle for recognition and respect

Living an Indigenous lifestyle in an urban environment isn't easy, even though about three-fourths of all Native Americans are now residing off U.S. reservations. About 70% are living in metropolitan areas, according to the 2010 U.S. Census.

"In the city of Chicago, we aren't surrounded by Natives," says Anthony Tamez-Pochel, 23, who identifies as First Nations Cree and Sicangu Lakota. "If we were to go to a ceremony in the park, on the river, or at the lake, people would stare or make comments or come up and disrupt that ceremony."

Tamez-Pochel, who once served as co-president of CNYC, says it was harder to honor their way of life in the streets of modern-day Chicago before the First Nations Garden was ever conceived. The garden has evolved from an agricultural hub into a safe haven, sheltering Indigenous youth and serving as a site for communal gatherings from celebrations to funerals.

"I have this sense of truly being free, like truly being able to be myself," Tamez-Pochel says. "I think that's the spirit of the garden."

Since its founding in 2012, CNYC has worked to strengthen the cultural and communal connections between Indigenous youth and their unique kinships with "aunties" and "uncles" who are considered leaders who they can lean on to steer them in the right direction. With the onset of the pandemic, in particular, that has involved addressing food security and health needs by providing emergency food baskets, medical equipment and gardening boxes. Youth would even grab groceries for their elders, some of whom were immunocompromised and worried about leaving

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It's not uncommon for Native youth to be living with their aunts, uncles, grandmas or grandpas, taking care of them, because that's what happened in the past," Tamez-Pochel says.

The group's work was featured as a case study in "[Indigenous Youth as Agents of Change](#)," a report published last year by U.N.'s [Food and Agriculture Organization](#).

While Native youth work to beautify the city and combat public health crises and climate change, their struggle for recognition and respect continues. Even after the city council passed [a land acknowledgment](#) he authored in 2018, dedicated to "Indigenous peoples of Chicago and American Indian community who continue to practice tribal and inter-tribal traditions," Tamez-Pochel says many locals still see them not as friends, but as foreign foes.



Anthony Tamez-Pochel, who identifies as Fii Nations Cree and Sicangu Lakota, is the former co-president of the Chi-Nations Youth Council. (Photo by Gabriel Pietrorazio)

One neighbor has gone to great lengths to heckle the Native youth group by changing their WiFi name to "Fort Schneidski." That microaggression is layered in generational memories of land dispossession at their expense.

It's a traumatic history they're still trying to reconcile by reminding fellow non-Native Chicagoans that Indigenous peoples still call this city home, too.

A Native city, in name only

The forced removal of more than a dozen tribes through treaties and war prefaces the city's founding. It wasn't a single sweeping erasure, but one that colonial settlers slowly chipped away at over decades.

That process started with the Treaty of Greenville in 1795, which ceded lands at the mouth of the Chicago River. It allowed the U.S. to build [Fort Dearborn](#) along the same waterway in 1803 to "plant a toehold in Indian Country," says Ann Keating, a history professor at North Central College and author of "[Rising Up from Indian Country: The Battle of Fort Dearborn and the Birth of Chicago](#)."

It was part of the federal government's westward expansion plan to creep further away from the densely populated East Coast into the uncharted Midwestern territories particularly cherished by the Potawatomi and Sauk peoples. Their women would grow crops on the fertile soil and trade with travelers who headed west of the Mississippi River.

"I think the Black Hawk War sped the process of expropriating lands from Potawatomi, but it was already underway by the time of the Sauk war," Keating says. "When they returned east to find settlers had built houses and barns and were farming their fields, that's what sparked the war."

When Sauk women returned from the village of Saukenuk to harvest corn and find their homelands re-occupied east of the Mississippi, Sauk chief Black Hawk amassed an army of 1,200 and [waged war against the U.S.](#) in the summer of 1832.

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term [Skunkunkwa](#). The word's origins has many meanings and interpretations, ranging from legends of a skunk who devoured humans to smelly leeks and onions that grew along the marshy shores of Lake Michigan.

The second Treaty of Chicago, signed in 1833, forced the Potawatomi, Odawa and Ojibway tribes to cede all land in northeastern Illinois and southeast Wisconsin. They kept a Native name, but erased the footprints of their original occupants by the city's incorporation in 1837.

Two centuries in the making, Tamez-Pochel's 2018 land acknowledgment paved the way for their First Nations Garden to blossom into a rare place where Chicago's Indigenous youth can reconnect to their agricultural heritage with pride.

"It's what our ancestors did hundreds of years ago," Tamez-Pochel says. "Just Native people continuing to practice our culture with what little access we have to land in the city of Chicago."

Once the Indigenous populations were gone, Keating says the U.S. General Land Office surveyed and turned treaty-acquired lands into real estate, feeding a speculation lot boom. But those displaced would've never imagined returning to the same city that removed them in the first place.



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Reeling from a lingering legacy, reclaiming urban land

In 1956, the U.S. Indian Relocation Act, also known as the Adult Vocational Training Program, uprooted the lives of at least 100,000 tribal residents, whom [the Bureau of Indian Affairs' agents had convinced](#) to venture from rural reservations into bustling cities in search of new job opportunities.

"The irony in the last instance of the federal government-sponsored Native relocation to cities is that, in many instances, the places where cities are today, were historically Native thriving communities," William Scarborough tells Next City.

Scarborough is a data scientist and co-author of "[Adversity and Resiliency for Chicago's First: The State of Racial Justice for American Indian Chicagoans](#)," a report published by the University of Illinois at Chicago in 2019.

That [Indian Termination Era-policy](#) helped Chicago claim its moniker as the city with the highest Indigenous population in the Midwest, tallying an estimated 39,000 residents across more than 100 tribes in Cook County. The Windy City also touts the second-largest population east of the Mississippi River, according to their report.

The impacts of privatizing lands once controlled by Indigenous peoples and encouraging them to leave their communities behind cannot be ignored, Scarborough says.



Chi-Nations Youth Council are planting native wildflowers, including tobacco and black-eyed susans, along a chain link fence perimeter surrounding the First Nations Garden to pull lead out of the soil through a biochemical process called phytoremediation. (Photo by Gabriel Pietrorazio)

Nearly half of Native Americans were rent burdened between 2012 and 2016, which means they spent more than 30% of their income on housing. The report also found that only 40% of them were homeowners during that same timeframe.

And the city has been dealing with the lingering legacy of speculators subdividing land into urban lots from a grid system established by the Northwest Ordinance of 1787.

Geoff Smith, executive director of the [Institute for Housing Studies at DePaul University](#), says there's an estimated 32,000 privately-owned vacant lots in Chicago, based on an analysis of data compiled by the Cook County Assessor's Office.

On top of that, there are other vacant properties, including ones owned by tax-exempt entities and the city itself. Smith cautiously estimates that roughly 12,800 properties are also vacant, based on his review of the [city-owned land inventory](#), which consists of more than 20,000 entries.

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But more of these vacant parcels may be entrusted to future generations of urban Native youth with CNYC setting a precedent, says Chicago Alderman Carlos Ramirez-Rosa, who represents the 35th Ward of Albany Park.

Ramirez-Rosa played an instrumental role in getting the city to grant CNYC's garden proposal. He has remained impressed and inspired by their resilient grassroots organizing.

"If there's more American Indian gardeners that come forward and say, 'We want to care for this land the way the Chi-Nations Youth Council has cared for the First Nations Garden,' then absolutely, I would support that," Ramirez-Rosa says. "And we have a proof of concept; we have a model that we can point to at the corner of Wilson and Pulaski in the 35th Ward."

Gabriel Pietrorazio is a national award-winning journalist based in Washington, D.C. He closely covers Indigenous affairs, food and agriculture, politics and policy. His reporting has been honored by Native American Journalists Association and North American Agricultural Journalists, among other professional membership organizations. He also earned a master's degree from the Philip Merrill College of Journalism at the University of Maryland, College Park in 2021.

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