

Rooted legacy: This urban Native garden grew atop a former boarding school in Phoenix

KJZZ | By **Gabriel Pietrorazio**

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Colorful signs are staked inside NATIVE HEALTH's 1,700-square-foot traditional garden along West Pierson Street.

At 1822 W. Pierson St. in Phoenix, registered dietician Sumi Tohan, conducts a cooking demonstration for a simple, but filling dish containing the Three Sisters: corn, beans and squash, as a generator buzzes nearby.

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Sumi Tohan, a registered dietician, prepares a dish containing the Three Sisters: corn, beans and squash.

“As a diabetes educator, I spend a lot of my time not just talking about food or medication, it’s coping,” said Tohan. “And I definitely think gardening is one of those things. It’s a huge benefit that we get to incorporate that.”

Tohan is a certified diabetes care and education specialist at NATIVE HEALTH of Phoenix, an urban clinic focused on holistic health services and programming. She’ll soon return here to offer more nutritional tips on less than an acre of land, near Camelback Road and Interstate 17, a shared gardening space with the nonprofit Keep Phoenix Beautiful.

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Sierra Penn, NATIVE HEALTH's Indigenous garden educator, is spreading topsoil over seeds in egg cartons, some of which come from [Native Seeds/SEARCH](#), a Tucson-based nonprofit preserving heirloom foods. They'll soon sprout and be replanted inside their plot. That morning was filled with fun and a few laughs, but it wasn't always that way.

This 1,700-square-foot traditional garden first began three miles away, atop the remnants of an infamous boarding school – on the northeastern corner of Central Avenue and Indian School Road. It was adjacent to Steele Indian School Park – named after the Phoenix Indian School that stood for almost a century until it closed its doors in 1990.

→ [Q&AZ: How did Phoenix's Indian School Road get its name?](#)

Among Arizona's 47 institutions, this was the state's only federally-run non-reservation boarding school. It once consisted of more than 100 buildings, sprawling across 160 acres of former irrigable farmlands before it became a site of forced assimilation where Navajo and Apache youth were dragged away from their remote reservations, languages, families and ways of life.



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Sierra Penn, NATIVE HEALTH's Indigenous garden educator, standing inside their 1,700-square-foot traditional garden.

Hopi journalist Patty Talahongva, former executive producer at Indian Country Today, briefly lived at the school until 1979, after she and her sister, Rosalee, were sent by their

“Welcome to our signature exhibition: [Away From Home: American Indian Boarding School Stories](#),” said Talahongva, as she narrated that recorded audio exhibition at the Heard Museum. She was the only boarding school student to serve on its six-member advisory committee.

“I noticed it and I mentioned [it] to my mom. I said, ‘Gosh mom, I’m on this committee to help renovate this boarding school exhibit. Everyone else has a Ph.D.’” Talahongva recalled. “And she said, ‘You got your Ph.D. at Phoenix Indian.’ I said, ‘Well, I guess you’re right.’”



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Patty Talahongva stands underneath the Phoenix Indian School's dining room entrance way.

Something has kept calling Talahongva back, trying to keep the memory of forgotten victims alive by reminding park goers that this spot meant for relaxation and recreation was also a violent space not too long ago.

She spent eight years employed at the grassroots organization Native American Connections, helping preserve three original buildings, including one that turned into the Phoenix Indian School Visitor Center. Memorial Hall, an auditorium originally erected to host the school's assemblies and graduation ceremonies. Now, it can be rented out from the city for galas and other gatherings. “So, this building is older than the state of Arizona,” Talahongva explained.

*Gabriel Pietrorazio/KJZZ*

Memorial Hall, one of three original Phoenix Indian School buildings left, predates Arizona statehood.

All three of those buildings appear on the National Register of Historic Places, thanks in part to her. Now, she's even co-authoring a new book: "Indian School Road: The Stolen Children who Built the West."

"It was intriguing to us because we just moved across the street from where the garden would be," said Walter Murillo, chief executive officer at NATIVE HEALTH. He was approached by Keep Phoenix Beautiful to battle urban blight by bringing in community gardeners.

Florida developer, Barron Collier, agreed to enter a lease agreement, allowing them to steward its 15-acre vacant lot. He says hoeing, weeding and tending to the soil have tangible health benefits, but it meant so much more to heal that land despite its deeply troubling past.



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Walter Murillo, chief executive officer at NATIVE HEALTH of Phoenix, stands in front of its office headquarters along North Central Avenue.

“Having that garden at the Indian School property really seemed natural for us to do,” he added. “It was quite an undertaking, but it ended up being very successful for the time it was.”

Crossing the street made it convenient for them to frequently organize outdoor seasonal cooking demonstrations and potlatching celebrations. Until the Interior Department regained control of it in 2017, but Murillo insisted: “We are still connected to that land, being stewards.”

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“A lot of our friends, a lot of our families lived there, attended there or worked there,” Murillo elaborated, “and we're still here in Phoenix, so it'll always be a part of who we are.”

That sense of stewardship has since been stunted for years, through no fault of their own. That lot, once housed a thriving tradition garden, but now it's barren and littered with trash yet again.



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Indian School Road runs nearly 40 miles east-west through the Valley, named after the Phoenix Indian School.

Last year, the Federal Indian School Initiative’s investigation determined that at least 500 children died at 19 boarding schools — a statistic that is expected to rise in the coming years as research continues.

Talahongva pondered: “Again, you think about Phoenix Indian School was open for 99 years, and yet, there’s no marked gravesite here. We know the kids died, so what happened to them?”

That answer is unsettled. Talahongva said she’s upset this empty lot will be built over, and in turn, burying what’s possibly lurking beneath the surface.

“In this corner here, that's the hospital, and maybe there are former students who are buried there,” says Talahongva. “We don’t know, and will we ever know now that it's in the hands of a developer.”



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This 15-acre lot, where the traditional garden once thrived, has been largely vacant for more than a quarter of a century.

Pivotal Group, an investment firm founded by Francis Najafi, a minority owner of the Phoenix Suns, has been in possession of that property after purchasing it through an online auction for \$18.5 million in 2018. Requests for comments went unanswered.

“And I’m really concerned about the amount of high-rises that is planned,” she added, “something like six high-rises, 30-stories tall. It’s crazy. It hurts. It hurts to see that.”

Although Native American Connections couldn’t afford to acquire that location, Talahongva wishes that tribes had gotten together, purchased this land and “created something really cool for not just the Native community, but for all people.”

Back on West Pierson Street, Tom Waldeck, president and CEO of Keep Phoenix Beautiful, recounts downsizing from the 15-acre former boarding school to less than a single acre.

“The federal government kicked us off, and this property just popped up,” said Waldeck. “And they came here with us, so there were two crack houses on this property, and this was the front yard.”



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Tom Waldeck, president and CEO at Keep Phoenix Beautiful, has been battling urban blight for nearly two decades.

That property faces right across the street from Midtown Primary School. It was another blight-infested property within a crime-ridden residential neighborhood, but has since been cleaned up. His nonprofit pays the city property taxes and flips the bill to flow roughly 1,600 gallons of water through NATIVE HEALTH's fields every other week.

It only costs less than a couple hundred dollars annually.

"We kept our part of the bargain, and we will do that here too," said Waldeck. "We're all in this together. Although we hold the lease, these are the people who really get things done."

It's keeping an ancient irrigating tradition intact — one originating from the Huhugam — ancestors of the O'odham peoples — who constructed the first canals in the Southwest more than a millennium ago.

And Penn, who only started tending to NATIVE HEALTH's garden last month, gets to be a part of that living tradition. A recent environmental studies graduate from Haskell Indian Nations University, she's never unleashed such a sudden surge of water, until recently.

"I thought it was so cool to watch the water flow down," she recalled, "come in, help these plants thrive, grow and become what they're meant to be."

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NATIVE HEALTH of Phoenix shares less than a single acre with the nonprofit Keep Phoenix Beautiful.

That experience prompted her to buy a pair of black rubber boots to avoid getting drenched while wading through the rows of crops as mounds of nutrient-rich slowly soak it up.

This transformed property, like the other, is privately owned, so there's a chance NATIVE HEALTH and Keep Phoenix Beautiful might be displaced once again. Waldeck, who's readying to retire after a 16-year career, only has a little time left to worry about this owner possibly developing, too.

"I think about getting that call, and hopefully it doesn't come until after January, but it's always something that we have in mind," Waldeck admitted. "And again, what we do here, nothing is permanent."

But Murillo is willing to travel wherever their traditional garden may go next.

"Whether they've relocated here within their lifetimes, or they're here for generations, I think getting back to that is really, really fundamental," said Murillo. "It's sort of full circle that we're still caring for the land, even here in central Phoenix, and that it supports us."

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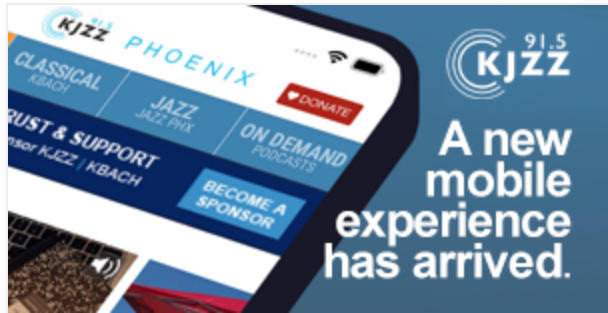
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Gabriel Pietrorazio is a correspondent who reports on tribal natural resources for KJZZ.

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