

FOUR BANDS COMMUNITY FUND: Cultivating Native Entrepreneurs as Power for a Proven Model of Community-Driven Change

By Clay Scott

At [Four Bands Community Fund](#), a Native community development financial institution (CDFI) on the Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation in South Dakota, they call it *Icahya Woecun*: The Place to Grow.



That Lakota phrase encapsulates Four Bands' Theory of Change, an integrated approach to entrepreneurial development and asset building that has helped strengthen the community for nearly two decades. Executive Director Lakota Vogel explains why the approach has worked on the Cheyenne River Reservation.

"Ours doesn't have a gaming casino for economic development," she says.

Sustainable Strategy for Change

"Here we've had to develop our own entrepreneurial systems from the ground up. Our Theory of Change model has proven to be sustainable, and it's withstood the test of time."

The four cornerstones of the model are education, finance, incubation, and advocacy.

"It begins with financial education," says Vogel. "When clients walk through our doors, we want to feel we can arm them with at least some basic and practical knowledge that they can build on."

"For example, we want everyone to understand the importance of credit scores. Without that," she says, "we're all at a severe disadvantage, or even at risk."



ABOUT NATIVE CDFIs AND IMPACT

CDFIs are private financial institutions dedicated to delivering responsible, affordable lending for underserved communities.

Native CDFIs are rooted in the cultural and historic context of Native communities and provide services that go beyond lending. They're engines of change, expanding economic opportunity and opening doors to loans, credit, jobs, and much more.

LEARN MORE: Check out our [webpage](#) devoted to Native CDFIs.

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LAKOTA VOGEL | Executive Director,
Four Bands Community Fund

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CHERYL DUPRIS



Entrepreneurs Pave the Way

Cheryl DuPris is one of those who was at risk.

“When I came to Four Bands,” she says, “I had an idea for a business, but I was in debt, and I was really worried about my credit score. I didn’t dare take on a loan. But I went through their courses, developed a strategy, presented my ideas to them, and got funding.”

Now DuPris is the owner of a successful food truck and plans to open a brick and mortar restaurant in Eagle Butte, SD.

“There’s such a need for that here,” she says. “There are no restaurants in this town and no Native-owned businesses along Main Street. I want to be the first. The Four Bands’ message is all about sustaining your community, and that’s what I am trying to do.”

Meanwhile, as DuPris finalizes plans for her restaurant, Four Bands is beginning work on a 5,000-square-foot business incubator in Eagle Butte.

Building Capital as a Community

“This is huge for our community,” says Four Bands Program Coordinator Alissa Benoist.

“We’re going to have space for 11 new businesses. A lot of people in our loan pipeline have some really good ideas for entrepreneurial projects, but can’t afford to buy and remodel a building. This will help them get a foot in the door.”

“It’s no secret,” says Vogel, “that Native Americans have historically had trouble gaining access to financial institutions and to mainstream lending opportunities.

“At Four Bands, we have worked to redress that, partly through advocacy, and partly through our own revolving loan fund. Our strategy is to strengthen the community and help grow the economy through financial training and investment in small, local microenterprise.”

That strategy has proven to be extraordinarily effective. Since 2000, the organization has deployed over \$10 million in loans, created 600 jobs in the local economy, and helped more than 800 community members increase their financial skills.

Vogel is confident that the new incubator will continue that trend.

“It is so heartening to see the enthusiasm for the project,” she says. “And among people of all ages. Nearly half our population is under 18, and if you don’t focus on them, you’re not going to create lasting change.

“But at Four Bands—and all Native CDFIs, for that matter—we are trying to be nation builders. At the end of the day, that’s why we do what we do.”



ALISSA BENOIST |
Program Coordinator,
Four Bands Community Fund

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