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Reinventing a Cultural Self: Textile Design and Native American Youth

Wendy Weiss
Mary Lee Johns

This presentation shows how the University Textiles, Clothing and Design department and the Indian Center of Lincoln, Inc., are collaborating to provide creative textile design programs for a group of 12 at-risk Native American youth, 12-18 years old. Family therapist, Dr. Gloria Gonzalez-Kruger, is conducting a research component which assesses the project's impact on youth development, cultural identity development, and intercultural relationships. The data will provide information on how to develop and implement culturally competent programs for youth.

Fall 1998, the youth began a series of short programs working at the university design studios. They worked with graduate students in a seminar on community based art to design and construct their own embellished tote bags, followed by a printed installation project with visiting artist Maria Tyniec of Poland. The images spoke about the ethnic traditions of the cultures of the youth and graduate students. Spring 1999, the youth designed a project for a daytime facility for homeless and near homeless adults. Modeled on the work with the Polish artist, the youth designed printed pillows hooked together to create a sound absorbing wall hanging for a high traffic space. The young people learned how to interview vulnerable adults to find out what subject matter was important to clients of diverse backgrounds. Fall 2000 the youth will work with visiting Native American designer, Madonna Thunderhawk, to design dance outfits for the girls in the youth group. They will create their own outfits that are both reflective of tradition and contemporary design.

Wendy Weiss is associate professor in the Textiles, Clothing & Design department and is the director of the Robert Hillestad Textiles Gallery at University of Nebraska in Lincoln. Awards include the 1999 Shades of Leadership Culture Center for her work with young people of color; Women's Artist Award, Lincoln/Lancaster Women's Commission, 1997; the Nebraska Arts Council Distinguished Artist Fellowship, 1995. Weiss organized the national touring exhibition of Different Voices: New Art from Poland featuring 20 contemporary women textile artists from Poland.

Mary Lee Johns has over 25 years of professional experience with an emphasis on program administration, Native American cross cultural education and training, program development and proposal writing, community assessments, organizing and development, health planning and youth leadership training. She has degrees in Human Services and Sociology. She is an enrolled member of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe and writes poetry, paints and design contemporary Indian Jewelry using a variety of mixed media.

Gloria Gonzalez-Kruger has a background in Psychology (B.S.), Family Studies (M.A./Ph.D.), and Marriage and Family Therapy (M.A.). Her primary objective is to engage in collaborative educational, research, and clinical experiences that develop or enhance services for people that are culturally relevant, responsive, and competent.