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McDonald's or Mesquite: Struggles on the Salt River Pima Reservation

Stefani Kim

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Jacob Butler holds, in his outstretched palm, an assortment of black and beige marbled Pima beige beans, one staple of a traditional Salt River Pima Indian diet. These beans and other seeds native to the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Reservation—a 54,000-acre area bordered by Scottsdale and Mesa, two Phoenix, Arizona suburbs—sustained both the Pima (Akimel O'odham) and Maricopa (Piipaash) tribes long before their source of water for farming began to dry up over a century ago.

“This is a direct link to our ancestors,” said Butler.

Butler, a coordinator for Salt River's community gardens program, is tapping into his tribe's longstanding farming practices both as a way to combat some of the chronic health problems plaguing his community and as a way for the tribe to be self-sustaining. The program started in 1998 as a revenue-producer for Salt River, but has since morphed into a holistic community experience that includes gardening and cooking classes as well annual harvests. Seeds from harvests are only redistributed locally or given to Native Seeds—a nonprofit seed conservation organization—to make sure they stay within the Pima community, he said. Native Seeds was founded based on the Tohono O'odham tribe's interest in obtaining and preserving the seeds their ancestors used for traditional dishes.

The Pima culture is rooted in a thousands-year tradition of farming and irrigation. Pimas believe that they are descended from the Hohokams, who pioneered an intricate canal system for farming in the Salt River Valley around 300 B.C. Though the Hohokams eventually died out, their descendants, along with the Maricopa tribe, grew tobacco, corn, beans, squash and cotton along the Gila River. In 1871, the Gila River's waters were diverted to other settlements, leaving little for the Pimas and Maricopas, at which point both tribes moved to more fertile ground next to the Salt River. In 1879, the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Reservation was established, but in the early part of the 20th century, another dam caused the river to dry up. That brought a sudden end to the Pimas' extensive farming.

Today, Salt River suffers a multitude of ills that are common to many native communities across the country: high unemployment, poverty, substance abuse rates, and teen pregnancy. Pima Indians in Arizona also have the highest rate of Type 2 Diabetes in the world—over 50 percent of adults have it on the Gila River Reservation an hour south of Salt River—a phenomenon attributed to a genetic propensity combined with the switch from a nutrient-rich traditional diet to government rationed foods that were heavily processed, according to several studies by the American Diabetes Association and National Institute of Health. Risk factors for diabetes include a diet high in saturated fat or sugar, obesity and a lack of exercise.

One of the goals of the community resource center is to teach people new ways to use traditional ingredients, with recipes for mesquite pancakes and cholla bud salads.

“These foods are low on the glycemic index. Cholla bud salads have as much calcium as eight ounces of milk,” said Butler. “There have been a lot of studies that say a traditional diet is the best way to treat diabetes and heart disease.”

A 2006 study in the *Journal of Transcultural Nursing* cites the lack of diabetes and obesity among North Dakota Indian tribes during pre-colonization years, when the tribes hunted and grew their own foods utilizing a traditional balanced diet. As these tribes were driven away from their native lands and farming declined, government rations replaced healthy food options and rates of diabetes and obesity began to grow.

Problems on the Reservation

Salt River is a jarring contrast from the high-end luxury stores and expensive restaurants serving the neighboring community of Scottsdale. Elegant stone and adobe haciendas in gated communities give way to miles of open farmland and modest homes, some with a variety of toys and rusted engine parts littering the front yard. A small dog limps slowly across the road as the desert sun beats down mercilessly, too weak to manage more than a slow crawl away from a car coming down the road. On the side of a dirt road, an irrigation canal feeds a nearby corn field that’s leased to a local agricultural company. In the background, the Red Mountains hover imposingly like the backdrop of an old Western movie.

Of the approximately 6,300 residents of Salt River, 30 percent have a household income under \$20,000, according to a 2010 American Community Survey, and 22 percent of households live in severe poverty; another 8 percent of residents hover near the poverty line. By comparison, the Gila River Indian Reservation—with nearly double the population—has a poverty rate of 48 percent, with 40 percent of households living on incomes under \$20,000. A diet of low-cost processed and fast foods can contribute to obesity, heart disease and diabetes, but is often one of the only options for those living in poverty.

At the edge of the reservation, just over the border in Mesa, a 24-hour McDonald’s and Carl Jr.’s fast food restaurant anchor the intersection of North Country Club Drive and McKellips Road. A half-mile away, there’s a Jack in the Box on McKellips Road—housed in low, nondescript building indistinguishable from other fast food establishments—as the monotonous desert landscape looms in the distance.

Daniel Garcia, a 22-year-old Salt River resident who works at the community garden, said he used to only eat fast food but recently changed his diet to include more traditional foods like beans and roasted corn. Soon he brought the food home to his family.

“My dad knew what it was but he hadn’t eaten it in a while,” he said.

Butler said there's a reason Garcia didn't know much about traditional foods before coming to work for the community resources department.

"Parents told this generation of kids, 'You don't want to be a farmer.' A lot didn't talk about it with their parents," he said.

Efforts to educate the community have not always been successful though. Butler acknowledges the difficulty of changing entrenched eating habits several generations after rations were introduced. Other reservation programs have also struggled with making meaningful changes.

Alicia Thomas, a 30-year-old assistant at the Huhugam Ki Museum on the reservation, is well-versed in the language of diabetes. Several members of her family have the disease, and she's one of the few that hasn't been diagnosed. She tries to eat healthy by growing produce in a small garden at her father's house that includes carrots, corn, chilies, squash, and zucchini.

Near to Thomas' desk at the museum are glass cases displaying the tightly woven, watertight baskets that were once used by the tribe to transport water and food. Constructed from willow shoots, cattails and devils claw, the intricately patterned baskets are stunningly beautiful but labor intensive to create, remnants of a bygone era. Like the reservation's community center, the museum holds classes to teach basic nutrition and cooks traditional recipes with ingredients like white tepary beans and mesquite flour once a year for Salt River's Community Day. Cultural traditions like basket weaving, though, much like cooking with beans and mesquite pods, have declined in popularity as people have less of a need to produce their own food.

Even Thomas didn't seem convinced that the program would have any significant effect on the community. Shaking her head slowly, she said, "Not many people go to the classes. The traditional foods here are gone. We're too close to convenience."

Obesity and Diabetes

Unlike some native communities located in desolate areas lacking in food options, Salt River is within driving distance of a variety of off-reservation grocery stores and restaurants. But, like many impoverished communities, food choices are often dictated by price. A 20-piece McDonald's Chicken McNugget meal with a large soda and French fries costs about \$5.00; by comparison, the cost of a cod fillet is \$5.99 per pound and bagged salad is \$1.50 per bag at the local Bashas' grocery store. The fast food option is both cheaper and more filling, an important consideration when it's unknown when the next meal will be coming.

The McDonald's meal has 1,730 calories, 2,090 milligrams of sodium and 202 carbohydrate grams. Though filling, one meal nearly meets the USDA recommended

number of daily calories (the number fluctuates between 1,600 to 3,000 depending on age, gender and activity level) and comes close to the USDA's recommendations for daily sodium intake of 2,400 mg [USDA recommendations skew lower—1,500 mg daily—if you are diabetic, have heart problems or over the age of 51]. And, despite the carb count falling within the 200-300 gram range recommended by the USDA, highly processed, simple carbohydrates in fast food can cause a rapid spike in blood sugar that can lead to weight gain, increased hunger and, eventually, blood sugar issues.

McDonald's Corporation did not respond to several requests for comment for this article.

On the other hand, a cod fillet has 189 calories, 125 milligrams of sodium and 0 carbs; it's also loaded with vitamins. Based on a 2,000 calorie diet, it has 30 percent of the USDA's recommendation for Vitamin B-6; 35 percent B-12 and 27 percent potassium. A Dole Spring Mix salad has 20 calories per serving, 95 milligrams of sodium and 3 grams of carbohydrates, along with a major dose of Vitamin A.

Obesity is another epidemic among Pimas as well as a major risk factor for diabetes. In a 30-year study of Pimas by the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, nearly all adults—95 percent—diagnosed with diabetes were overweight. This propensity toward excessive weight could be explained by the “thrifty genotype,” that scientists believe Pimas carry; a group of genes that evolved to help conserve fat and calories during periods when food was not readily available and tribal members were mostly working outdoors.

Dr. Eric Ravussin, a scientist who has studied obesity and Type II diabetes among Pimas in Arizona and Mexico, said that the thrifty genotype and Post-WWII lifestyle and diet changes may have contributed to increased obesity rates.

In contrast to Arizona Pimas, Mexican Pimas—who are genetically similar to their US counterparts—had significantly lower rates of diabetes and obesity within their group. Ravussin said that both diet and exercise were contributing factors to the differences among Pimas living in both places.

“The fat composition is much less; the two major things are very little refined sugar and high fiber content,” said Ravussin, adding that the Mexican diet consisted of fiber rich foods like beans and corn tortillas.

Mexican Pimas were also forced by geography to be self-sufficient.

“All their food until about five to ten years ago was cultivated within their community. Everyone has a little garden,” he said.

In many cases, problems with weight start early. A 2010 study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* looked at nearly 5,000 Pima and Tohono O'odham

children living in Arizona, 29 percent of which were obese. Over a 24-year-period they found that people that were obese as children had twice the risk of premature death as those that were of normal weight. In a 2006 American Diabetes Association study, researchers found that Pima children of mothers who were diabetic during pregnancy, were more likely to develop Type 2 diabetes as adults.

Dr. Paul Franks, head of the genetic and molecular epidemiology unit at Skane University Hospital in Sweden who co-authored both studies, said that little is known about the specific genes that cause diabetes among Pimas, however, there are preventative steps that can be taken to lower the risk among those that are genetically predisposed.

“Teaching children about sensible food choices, avoiding highly processed, carbohydrate-rich diets and excessive sugar sweetened beverage consumption, and keeping kids active is also very important,” said Franks. “A major problem for underserved communities though is that healthy foods and recreational facilities may be inaccessible, and there may be other societal barriers to healthy living, such as crime, belief structures, and peer pressure.”

Gardening on the Rez

Priscilla “Beanie” Jay carefully rips open a corn husk pulled from a small field in a dirt lot in the back of her home on Salt River. She opens her hands to reveal a miniature ear of corn and remarks that it is packed with nutrients. She grows Pima lima beans, chili peppers, cantaloupes, and jalapeno peppers here as well, all nourished by the unforgiving Arizona sun.

“We call this Ga’ivsa corn and what we do is build a fire and just put it on there and roast them and then when they’re dried out we clean them, get everything out of it and we grind it,” said Jay.

Jay, whose nickname reveals her gardening preferences, learned how to tend land from her grandfather Jasper Baptisto, who would sell beans, chilies, corn, tomatoes, and squash he grew on 10 acres in Salt River, at Navajo markets in Show Low and Heber, AZ. In her soft-spoken voice, she recounts fond memories of helping her grandfather plant seeds in the fields with her brothers and uncles.

“My best childhood memory is being able to bust open that melon and scoop out the middle,” Jay said, laughing.

Though many of her relatives in her grandfather’s generation farmed or kept small gardens at their homes, she was one of the few to continue the tradition. She’s hoping that her children will take after her, keeping the garden alive, but said that they are busy with their own lives and families.

“It makes me so happy when they pick herbs and make spaghetti with it,” said Jay.

“My grandfather hoped it was his kids [that would continue the tradition] but it was his grandkids,” she said, as her two grandchildren ran back and forth under a sheet hung to separate the living room and kitchen.

Recently, Jay’s husband, Michael, was diagnosed with diabetes. Jay, who spent a decade working as a researcher with the National Institute of Health and Diabetes Prevention Network, began to modify the family diet. They have limited eating out to twice a month and have substituted high-fat, high-caloric foods with foods such as chili, as well as beans and squash from her garden. As a result, Michael was only insulin-dependent for seven months.

In addition to eating what she grows, Jay has bartered her goods for singing classes and given seeds to the community garden bank for future plantings. In 2015, she hopes to produce up to 80 pounds of Pima lima beans for a community garden initiative by local restaurants.

But, as others in the community have suggested, it’s not easy to lure people away from quick and easy food choices.

“We’re at a point here where we’re really enclosed by city. McDonald’s is a quarter mile away. We’re kind of falling into the rest of America where we want everything right away,” said Jay, as tiny, red ants formed circles around her feet.

She is hopeful that others in the community will follow in her footsteps. She looked out over the flat, sandy landscape of her backyard to the houses of several neighbors, many of whom are also relatives.

Jay’s advice to others is simple.

“Try to start small with a garden so you’re not overwhelmed,” she said. “Lots of people have small plots.”