



Issue 89

BrainWise and Indigenous Populations

Matt Sena Introduced BrainWise to Alaska Natives. In college, **Matt Sena** taught BrainWise at a youth center in Grand Junction, Colorado and wrote his Master Thesis on BrainWise and young fathers. Twenty-five years later, he is a BrainWise Master Instructor, member of the BrainWise Board of Directors, and cherished colleague.

Matt has taught BrainWise to thousands of youth and adults, written grants, helped evaluate outcomes, and trained educators and other professionals throughout the nation, including Alaska. He spent several years as a counselor with Chugachmiut, a tribal consortium that provides health and social services training to seven native communities on the Kenai Peninsula.

Matt introduced BrainWise soon after he arrived and helped organize a training for tribal leaders and educators in 2005. The program's positive outcomes led Indian Health Services (IHS) to list BrainWise on their registry of effective programs for Alaska Natives and Native Americans in 2017. Matt trained additional educators with the Kodiak Area Native Association (KANA) in 2015 and 2019 ([See Issue 43 – More Kodiak Community](#))



Matt Sena



2015 KANA BrainWise training with Matt

The following interview with Melanee Stevens, a graduate of Matt's 2005 BrainWise training, demonstrates its successful outcomes.

Longtime BrainWise Advocate Melanee Stevens

Stevens taught BrainWise for 14 years to Chugachmiut youth and adults before taking a position as Education/Project Director for the Confederated Tribes of the Chehalis Reservation in Oakville, Washington in 2019. She happily shared her experiences teaching BrainWise to indigenous youth.



Melanee's work includes one-on-one counseling and groups with youth and adults. She says that even though she spends less time teaching adults, they appreciate and quickly learn to apply key Wise Ways to their problems.

Her expertise as a curriculum developer gives her insight into the different curricula available and she knows staff can be overwhelmed by the choices. She offers guidance and tells them that "adding BrainWise will help make their programs better without creating more work." She shares outcome examples that show how the program's tools have helped others address problems similar to those they face.

Teaching Tips. Melanee makes sure instructors know that everything they need is in the curriculum and can be easily integrated into their teaching. She offers these tips for successful outcomes:

- Show respect.
- Use the brain as a teaching tool to explain behaviors and help students recognize how concepts taught in other programs they have learned (suicide prevention, bullying, and anger management) fit under the 10 Wise Ways.
- Help students apply the Wise Ways to cultural situations and problems specific to them.
- Reinforce. Reinforce. Reinforce.

Teaching Examples. Billy is one of her favorite examples. She used Wise Ways working together to show him how to manage his anger. "When he was calm, I would take him through the **Red Flags**, his emotions and where they were on the **Emotions Elevator**, how to manage his emotions before they zoomed to the top and help him think about what he could do. This helped him stop and think about what he could do the next time, and he learned how to lower his rising emotions before they got out of control.

Melanee smiled when she shared an experience she had with another former student who was an adult participant at a meeting they both attended. She had responded in anger to a comment and was surprised when a voice in the audience asked her, "Are you using your **Lizard Brain or Wizard Brain?**" She was taken aback but pleased that he had remembered Wise Way #1 and "threw it back at me!"

A teaching tool she uses is to ask students to open a hand and spread their fingers. She asks them, "Who are your FIVE that you can count on?" and helps

them identify people and resources who can be double lines in their **Constellation of Support**. She includes call or text Help Lines as a resource. She shares the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline where they can press #4 for Native American and the Crisis Text Line where they can text NATIVE to 741741. These lines link them to a trained Native counselor.

Relationship violence is high among indigenous girls and women and teaching them about **Red Flag** warnings is a way to help them be aware of dangerous relationships. Examples of red flags include a partner who isolates them from family and friends, controls how they look and dress, and supplies/administers drugs and alcohol.

Emotions Fireworks Example. Canadian BrainWise instructor Dr. Gary Brayton shared how his teen client, a car mechanic, replaced the Emotions Elevator with an Emotions Engine ([See issue 88 on Dr. Brayton.](#)) His example inspired Melanee to suggest that fireworks could be used as a culturally appropriate metaphor for some indigenous groups. She said the use of fireworks is unrestricted on the reservation, so they are popular and widely used. She said **Emotion Fireworks** could involve setting up the firework, lighting it, and having the fuse range from a slow fizzle to a fast explosion.

Fact vs. Opinion Examples. Native cultures have a history of broken treaties and examples of disrespect and deceit. Melanee recommends the book, *Killers of the Flower Moon* by David Grann (more detailed than the award-winning movie), as a source for indigenous problem situations that cover all the Wise Ways.

Once instructors introduce cultural examples early in BrainWise, they have access to problems they can use to teach the remaining five Wise Ways -- **Ask Questions, Identify Choices, Consider Consequences, Set Goals, and Communicate Effectively.**

Oral and written indigenous stories provide teaching tools and reinforcement activities. Tribes have their own traditions and stories, and their history records their courage, bravery, dignity, and sadness.

I lived for a month each on the Pine Ridge and Window Rock Reservations as part of an undergraduate field program in sociology at the University of Colorado. I was excited to have the opportunity because my Irish-born mother told me how the Choctaw Nation and other tribes donated money to Ireland during 1847 potato famine, despite their own abject poverty and a few years after the tragic Trail of Tears.

(<https://www.nps.gov/trte/learn/historyculture/what-happened-on-the-trail-of-tears.htm>)

The story is taught to Irish schoolchildren and many remember it. In 2020, the Irish reciprocated by donating more than \$5 million to Native tribes to help them recover from COVID. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WlapEAWWDQc>)

I am grateful to reconnect with Melanee. Matt and I look forward to working on a future project with her and Chehalis Reservation leaders. Additionally, Dr.

Gary Brayton is working with members of the Blood Tribe in Alberta to integrate BrainWise into their youth programs.

Thank you for teaching BrainWise.



Take care,

Dr. Pat

On a Lighter Note

The Alaska Native Community and a gaming company produced **Never Alone**, an interactive video game that tells the story of Nuna who explores a harsh, Artic world with a fox companion to find the source of a never-ending blizzard that threatens her village.

Instructors can use BrainWise posters, cards, or problem-solving worksheets – in the curriculum or made by students – to identify the wise ways that help them guide Nuna and assess choices for other characters. <http://neveralonegame.com/>



BrainWise | 6450 S. Quebec St., Suite 558 | Centennial, CO 80111-4681 US

[Unsubscribe](#) | [Update Profile](#) | [Constant Contact Data Notice](#)



Try email marketing for free today!