

## Leah Staples: Family Spirit Home Visitor



There's a sign at Northwest Indian Community Development Center (NWCDC) that simply says, "*Gidebwewenimin*". For those that don't speak Ojibwe, there's a translation underneath: I believe in you. Those powerful words are not just posted for encouragement; they speak of the philosophy of this agency. Meeting with the Family Spirit team there, it's easy to see those values put into action.

Leah Staples has worked at the NWCDC in Bemidji for two years as a Family Spirit home visitor. She has a caseload of 30 families and a waiting list of 35 more, most of whom are self-referred. Her reputation as a caring, knowledgeable, and non-judgmental support professional has grown in this rural community.

"Most of my families come to me for support and education," she shares, "but others are in crisis, maybe experiencing incarceration, homelessness, or substance use. I just meet them where they are and fully listen to them. Many of these families experiencing challenges never had parenting themselves, perhaps they grew up in foster care."

"The greatest challenge in my work is not having *enough*. Not enough time to serve all the families that want help, not having enough resources such as housing or transportation. It weighs on me. But I draw on our culture for strength and guidance." As a member of the Red Lake Nation, Leah states those traditional teachings remind her to stay humble and to follow the Seven Teachings to help others find their own path to health. "These teachings guide me every day in my work. They remind me I'm strong and help me stay positive, to stay loving and caring. If I treat others that way, I can treat myself with the same kindness."



Leah's own path has not always been smooth. In her past, she's had brushes with the legal system and incarceration. "I can't say I'm proud of the person I used to be, but in a way, I'm grateful for those experiences. I truly know what it feels like to walk in those shoes. I also know what it takes to stay sober and be a present parent. I think people listen to me because they know I've been where they're at, but I got through it. I turned the bad into something good. It shows them they can do it too."

Leah's supervisor, Jennifer Greenleaf, agrees. She adds, "Leah's lived experience may be the most valuable knowledge that she shares with our families. Almost every family is struggling with poverty, substance abuse, generational trauma, and/or incarceration. These are big barriers and not something people are always wanting to share with another person. The stories that go along with these issues are painful, but Leah does an amazing job being a supportive listener. She shares her own stories that make her relatable to our families and she is able to create meaningful relationships with the mothers. So much of what happens to

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indigenous women is a result of living in an oppressive, colonized world, and can lead to depression. They trust her and reach out to her in the times when they are struggling.”

Leah understands that the ‘secret sauce’ to her success is her ability to develop authentic and healthy relationships with her participants and their families. Jennifer is proud of her; she was once Leah’s mentor. She shares, “Without Leah making these relationships, I believe we would have more mothers silently suffering. Leah is many times the only person in their lives who they can turn to for guidance and support.” Leah backs up her emotional intelligence with some serious credentials. In addition to being certified to deliver the Family Spirit model, she’s also certified as a Sexual Assault Advocate, a Peer Support Recovery Specialist, a CNA, and a nutrition educator through Johns Hopkins. She’s also a Certified Lactation Consultant, a role that has helped to increase breastfeeding rates in their participants from 8% to 98% since she’s been there. Her face lights up when she shares that data. “Not only do our moms start breastfeeding, but they also continue until after their child’s first birthday. We’re bringing back our healthy traditions.” Leah’s love for learning and teaching are having lasting impacts in this community.

Jennifer and Leah’s goal for their agency is to be able to provide more services to families experiencing incarceration and to continue to be able to provide and expand group parenting education at a local substance use disorder treatment center. “I’ve seen so many people turn their lives completely around with just a little education and support. Sometimes people just don’t know how to do better, or they don’t feel anyone cares. Family home visiting can change both of those things.”

Jennifer has worked hard to ensure the Family Spirit Program continues to thrive at their non-profit. They’re looking to hire more staff but finding the right person can be difficult. “The NWICDC appreciates the hard work Leah puts into every family. This really is hard work - it takes someone special,” she shares thoughtfully, “but we’ll keep looking. We have to; the need is there.”

Minnesota Department of Health  
Family Home Visiting  
[health.familyvisiting@state.mn.us](mailto:health.familyvisiting@state.mn.us)  
[www.health.state.mn.us](http://www.health.state.mn.us)