



An Indigenous Leader

Evon Peter, Tanan Ch'at'oh
Alaska

☀ Call to Action

Support Gwich'in language revitalization: www.tananchatoh.com

Follow Evon on Twitter: [@evonpeter](https://twitter.com/evonpeter)

Visit www.nativemovement.org

☀ Values

- Community
- Respect
- Leadership
- Sustainability
- Environmentalism

☀ Lessons Learned

Respect for Indigenous peoples and their communities is key to sustainability.

If you want to make a difference, find where your true passion lies, and follow that path. Go back to your roots. They are the true source of your strength.

Learn to redefine the meaning of success by focusing on your skills and your own individual wisdom and decide how you can use them to help your community.

Evon Peter grew up in a village nearly 100 miles above the Arctic Circle.

Despite being surrounded by natural beauty, Evon faced challenges early in his life. His mother moved him to Fairbanks so he could have a better education, but when he was 14 the school counselor told him and other native boys they were more likely to end up dead, or in jail, by the time they were 25 than they were to graduate. Evon dropped out of high school, but later graduated from the University of Alaska. While in college, he became active in student government, organizing and co-leading a native student organization. This led to his lifelong quest to improve life for native peoples. Today he works with issues related to trauma and integrating Indigenous cultural practices with behavioral health interventions. His major goals are preventing suicide, which is at epidemic proportions in native communities, and preserving native Alaskan languages. He is also concerned about the effects of climate change: "It's impacting the health and well-being of our people," he says.

☀ Language Arts

Evon talks about the quality of his education in public school and his mother's education in boarding school.

Conduct a Socratic Seminar in which you and your classmates discuss how education has been used as a tool for oppression in Indigenous communities, and how we can change that and use it as a tool for healing, growth, justice, equality, and multiculturalism.

How have climate change and pollution affected native communities in Alaska? Create a group presentation about this topic. Focus on the economic, cultural, social, and health consequences for these communities.

After watching Evon’s video [Indigenous Wisdom and Healing with Evon Peter¹](#), answer the following questions:

How do Evon’s definitions of success and wealth differ from our traditional definition? Do you agree with him that we should look at success and wealth from his point of view? Why is he opposed to Indigenous communities accepting contracts from the energy industry or the military? Do you think he is right? Why or why not? Discuss your answers with the rest of the class. After the discussion, write a brief paragraph in which you explain how this discussion has changed, or affected, your point of view on these issues.

Research boarding schools for Indigenous peoples. What was their purpose? Working in groups of 3-5 people, create a presentation in which you discuss colonialism: What it is? In what ways did the American government try to colonize Indigenous communities? What were some of the consequences of these attempts (both for the Indigenous populations and for the U.S.)? What can be done to heal the wounds these attempts have caused? After the presentations, conduct a [Round Table²](#) discussion on these subjects with your peers. Ask yourselves what you can do as a group, or individually, to help right past wrongs?

STEM Activities

In this [media-rich lesson from PBS³](#), explore the ways in which Alaska natives understand and relate to the world.

Then complete a science fair project that demonstrates how traditional knowledge can be applied to a scientific topic. The lesson ends with a classroom science fair, during which projects are evaluated on both their cultural and scientific content.

In this [lesson plan on permafrost⁴](#), students will learn about permafrost and coastal erosion, and subsistence living, and will develop an understanding of how Alaska Native peoples rely on permafrost, and are being affected by changes to it.

Research the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) and brainstorm why it is protected. Why is this area important to the Gwich’in? What resources does it provide that they rely on? Why is it important to their history and culture? In what ways are the Gwich’in being negatively affected by climate change?

Sustainability Innovations

Evon expanded his work by assessing oppressive systemic power structures as a member of [Native Movement⁵](#).

Today, Native Movement thrives by allowing members to shape their own leadership models through an Indigenous worldwide view. How could such a view affect someone’s place-based knowledge and sense of community?

When addressing climate change, organizations of all sizes assess the impact that Indigenous people have on the land. The [UN⁶](#) has identified the challenges and opportunities for Indigenous peoples in sustainability; in particular, in using traditional knowledge to solve climate issues.

In this [Yale School of the Environment article⁷](#), native tribes and their ability to lead the movement against climate change is addressed. Their deeply rooted ties to tradition and the Earth allow native tribes to better prepare for preserving sustainable practices for future generations.

Sustainability Career Pathways

Environmental Mental Health Counselor. As environmental conditions worsen, more people will suffer [mental health challenges due to the effects of climate change, and fears about the looming sustainability crisis](#)⁸. This is another reason to consider the field of psychology, mental health counseling, or even [ecotherapy](#)⁹ (which uses nature to help heal psychological trauma). Here is a brief [introduction to the field](#)¹⁰. If you want to gain some experience now, the Samaritan Helpline—which offers free counseling for those suffering from depression, loneliness, and suicidal thoughts—also offers [free training to those who commit to volunteer for the helpline for nine months](#)¹¹.

Indigenous Educator. Educational opportunities are valued highly in Indigenous communities, and yet they may be less available. Have you considered teaching Indigenous students—[especially in ways that value and respect the culture and history of these peoples](#)¹²? The Indigenous Educators Corps helps to place teachers in Indigenous communities. [Learn more here](#)¹³.

University Administrator. It's not only professors who work at universities. Administrators (an average of 500 per university) maintain everything from admissions and financial aid to budgeting, housing, diversity coordination, and sustainability planning; they help keep these centers of education running smoothly. If a career in university administration sounds interesting to you, [learn more here](#)¹⁴.

1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pDeL209qVro>

2 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KvhPDg6EH7U>

3 <https://mass.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/can08.sci.ess.earthsys.lpnativeways/alaska-native-ways-of-knowing/>

4 https://www.alaska.edu/k12reach/pdf-lessons/mshs-lessons/permafrost_thaw_teacher_guide_HS.pdf

5 <https://www.nativemovement.org/leadership-development>

6 <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/2021/04/indigenous-peoples-sustainability/>

7 <https://e360.yale.edu/features/how-native-tribes-are-taking-the-lead-on-planning-for-climate-change>

8 <https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2020-12-27/for-young-californians-climate-change-is-a-mental-health-crisis-too>

9 <https://www.goodtherapy.org/learn-about-therapy/types/econature-therapy>

10 <https://onlinecounselingprograms.com/become-a-counselor/counseling-careers/mental-health-counselor/>

11 <https://samaritanshope.org/get-involved/volunteer-on-the-helpline/>

12 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indigenous_education

13 <https://www.nacainspiredschoolsnetwork.org/nisn-amicorps-opportunities>

14 <https://www.princetonreview.com/careers/40/college-administrator>

