

Bringing technology to American Indians



Leslie Smith at the Man of the Year award banquet

In his spare time, Leslie M. Smith brings technology to some of the most remote locations in the United States . . . American Indian reservations. Even in 2007, many American Indians who live on reservations have never laid a hand on a mouse or punched a single button on a keyboard.

“On the way to most of these reservations, there is nothing,” Leslie said. “No gas stations,

shopping malls or convenience stores. Some reservations even lack basics like electricity, so it's no wonder technology doesn't enter the picture. These really are some of the most remote places in the United States."

So how did a Business Development Executive from White Plains, NY get involved with American Indians?

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Leslie volunteers as the Chairman of the Board for SeniorNet, an organization whose mission is to "provide older adults education for and access to computer technologies to enhance their lives and enable them to share their knowledge and wisdom."

During Leslie's tenure as Chairman of SeniorNet, he met Carroll Coccchia, the president of the Native American Chamber of Commerce. "Carroll told me about the plight of the First Americans and I was moved, but it wasn't until I saw it firsthand that I realized how desperate the situation really was," Leslie said.

The plight of the American Indians

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On the reservations, American Indians have their own schools, grow their own food, and trade for goods and services. Many go their whole lives without ever stepping foot off their

reservation.

“Indian Reservations are subsidized by the Federal government, which although helpful, also perpetuates the problem: generation after generation of American Indians are dependent on the government,” Leslie said. “So there is no motivation to learn something new, to branch out and make life different. Rates of alcoholism, smoking and suicide are high among this population.”

After seeing the reservations, meeting some American Indians and learning about their culture, Leslie became determined to make a difference in their lives. He knew that introducing technology on the reservations was the right thing to do. He was so determined to help, in fact, that he became the new Chairman of the Native American Chamber of Commerce.

A plan comes together

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Leslie realized he was sitting on a goldmine. If he combined his SeniorNet resources along with those of the Native American Chamber, he could really make some changes. “I had access to more than 240 brick and mortar learning centers through SeniorNet,” Leslie said. “The skills of the trainers we have are second to none. I knew they could help train the American Indians on how to use technology . . . **we just had to get the technology.**”



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