

Illinois Humanities Grantee Spotlight with:  
**HEATHER MILLER**  
**AMERICAN INDIAN CENTER**

**PROJECT:** *Northwest Portage Walking Museum (approved Aug. 2019)*

**LOCATION:** Chicago, IL

**ORGANIZATION:**

Founded in 1953, the American Indian Center (AIC) was established to provide a gathering space with culture-based programs for Native American families displaced by the Federal Relocation Program of the 1950s. The AIC's mission is "To promote fellowship among Indian people of all Tribes living in metropolitan Chicago and to create bonds of understanding and communication between Indians and non-Indians in this city. To advance the general welfare of Indian people, to sustain cultural, artistic, and avocational pursuits, and to perpetuate Indian cultural values." The AIC has received seven grants from Illinois Humanities.

**PROJECT:**

"The broader project is the Northwest Portage Walking Museum, an outdoor museum that will stretch for eight miles along Irving Park Road, weaving an interpretive connection between the Chicago and Des Plaines Rivers. It is meant to celebrate the natural and cultural living histories of indigenous peoples and local communities through art, education and recreation. Illinois Humanities grant funds went specifically to create a curriculum and support programming for the museum. This project is the result of strong partnership between the Chicago Public Art Group, the American Indian Center, and the Portage Park Neighborhood Association, among others.

**UPCOMING EVENTS:**

 Learn about upcoming events at [www.aicchicago.org](http://www.aicchicago.org)

 Follow on Twitter at [@aicchicago](https://twitter.com/aicchicago)

 Like on Instagram at [@americanindiancenter](https://www.instagram.com/americanindiancenter)



## QnA SESSION:

*\*\*The QnA session with Heather Miller, Executive Director of the American Indian Center, was moderated by Mark Hallett, Program Manager, Grants on February 17, 2020.*

**Question:** *What is the most important thing people should know about your work at the AIC?*

**Heather:** *The AIC, here in Chicago, is really special. We are the first American Indian center in the entire country. And this is cool because Illinois itself is a state that has no federally recognized tribal lands, even though Indians have always called these lands our home. We don't have any land, any specific tribes that call this area their home. So the AIC is truly a place where our community can come gather to practice their heritage, their traditions, and to participate in this really cool art world that we as native people have, and that is special to our culture and our heritage.*

**Question:** *Who makes your work possible?*

**Heather:** *Our work is about the community. It truly takes the entire community to make the AIC function, and to run well. We are a nonprofit organization, and we serve one of the largest urban Indian populations in the country. We have the ninth largest urban native population here, in Chicago, the largest in the Midwest, and the second largest east of the Mississippi. So we've got a lot of native people here, and that means we have a lot of different tribal belief systems, we have a lot of different cultures, but then we also operate in the larger venue of Chicago itself. So we're also an educational hub to non-native folks who want to learn about American Indian culture and customs. We serve folks who want to participate in their own culture, and folks who want to learn more about our culture. We're a resource for the city itself, to learn its history and connection to native people, and also a nonprofit organization that relies heavily on volunteers, as well as an amazing staff. We also work with a variety of different funders who are engaged in different areas such as arts and culture, education, environmental work – so we're lucky to have folks like Illinois Humanities, the Joyce Foundation, the Field Foundation, and even funders like the Union Pacific Railroad, which looks to make impact in the areas it operates in.*

**Question:** *How do you see the arts/culture/humanities as being essential?*

**Heather:** *The arts and culture sector is so important to us, because one of the things that we talk about as native people, is that art is this sort of foreign concept to us. We don't have a word in a lot of our languages and traditions, for art. Art is just something that we do. It's part of who we are. So for example, we do things like song and dance. And in order to make that happen we have to do things like build our own instruments, or build our own regalia. We're nature based, and land based people, so when we want to build a drum, we go outside and find a tree that we can harvest to build the base of the drum, and we find an animal that wants to be harvested, and use its skin to mold the base of the drum, around that wood. Then we'll make the design in a way that represents our lineage and connection to our land. So that's a form of art, in a sense, but really for us it's our life, it's everything we do. So art permeates every single relationship that we have, with the land, with individuals, with our connection out to a greater world. So for us, art is life. It's literally every part of our being, and we would not be living, breathing people if it were not for the arts and the humanities.*

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**Question:** *Anything else?*

**Heather:** *The Northwest Portage Walking Museum project matters so much because this project is really dedicated to the history and the culture of all communities that were based along Irving Park Road on the northwest side of Chicago. It's based on the history that we all celebrate, that connects us all to Irving Park Road, and that celebrates all the unique and amazing things that we all bring to the city, and to this place, that continues to create the city that we now all call home.*