

THE SACRED CIRCLE

SUBMITTED BY MORNING STAR CARE CENTER

In Native American traditions, Life is a Sacred Circle. All life is formed in a circle with Creator in the center of all creation. This circle is represented by the drum, and the edge of the drum represents all living things. The drum holds great cultural power and spirit. It carries the heartbeat of Mother Earth and calls the spirits together. The drum can restore balance and renewal to people who listen to this heartbeat.

Former leaders of the Eastern Shoshone Tribe knew there was a great need for a safe place for the Elders of the tribe to be able to go, be cared for and remain in our community. A plan was formed, and in 1984, the doors of the first Native American nursing home in the state of Wyoming was opened. The home, where 45 people can live, is open to Native and non-native populations. The drumbeat of Morning Star started beating.

Over the years, Morning Star functioned as a typical, institutional-style nursing home, similar to other nursing homes across America. It had its share of revolving door administrators, various management companies and financial struggles. The institutionalized setting dictated how the residents lived. They were told when to get up, when to eat and when to sleep. The staff were the “bosses,” outings were limited or non-existent and showers were cold. But the drumbeat of Morning Star continued very, very softly.

A few years ago, an administrative team leader read about the Eden Alternative. Discussions were held among staff, and it was agreed Morning Star needed a new direction. Morning Star needed to be revived. It needed renewal and its balance restored. Morning Star needed to revive its Sacred Circle of Life.

The staff started researching best practices and resident-centered care. We sent our first team to the Eden Alternative training in 2015. Our journey to a new and brighter Morning Star began. Several months later, we sent another team to the Eden training. We quickly realized the need for more in-depth, community-wide training in a variety of disciplines, with the greatest focus on dementia and teamwork. Trainers were invited from Central Wyoming College, University of Wyoming and various mental health services for trainings related to dementia, brain injuries, teamwork and enhanced care. We continued to send groups of staff to Eden Alternative trainings. We also started presenting a variety of training webinars. We began to incorporate best practices from Teepa Snow and other experts in the field of dementia and long-term care. We currently have biweekly trainings in specific areas. We continue to send staff to the Eden Alternative trainings out-of-state. Not only do we desire to empower our Elders, but our employees as well.

On February 26, 2018, Morning Star Care Center became the first Native American nursing home in the United States to be listed on the Eden Registry. Our staff started the journey of learning teamwork and empowerment. The language at Morning Star changed. Our “residents” became “Elders.” Our “facility” became a “community.” Our “feeders” became people who need assistance to eat. We purchased headsets for all staff to improve communication. Respect, dignity and pride have become our new “buzz” words, and Morning Star started to breathe, and the drum beat a little louder.

With a new administration team, we corrected our finances, which allowed us to make badly needed environmental changes as well. Regulators were placed on every water faucet, so the shower temperature could be raised. We tore out the institutional shower room and created a “spa” with bamboo plants, tropical pictures and soft lighting. Vanity cupboards and towel warmers were installed in all bathrooms. Thermometers were placed on the walls of the shower rooms, and our staff received more

training to know that warm showers would now be the only acceptable method at Morning Star. Inviting, walk-in whirlpool tubs were installed. We ripped out ratty carpet. We hauled off torn and stained furniture. We tore down broken, hopeless and tattered blinds. We tore out the “institutional model” nursing station and replaced it with a simple desk. Soft, upholstered rocking chairs by the desk allow our Elders to sit, visit and feel comfortable in their home. We installed warm and inviting hardwood style flooring, comfy new furniture and new curtains. A large bird aviary was purchased. Thirteen birds now live with us, and our Elders are thrilled. They watch the baby birds hatch and begin their new lives.

We were invited to join our local Tribal Health and Tribal Recovery program to join their horse culture activities. Our Elders attend horse culture once a week. Elders can ride or just pet and love the horses. And Morning Star breathed a little easier, and our drum beat a little louder.

We collaborated with the University of Wyoming/Wyoming Centers on Aging to create a sensory room and beauty shop. The sensory room has a variety of soothing colored lights, fountains and a large-screen television that plays soft music with a variety of calming nature scenes.

We added a patio in the back of the building and built wheelchair-accessible flower and vegetable planters, so our Elders can feel the warm soil and watch their gardens grow. We are now collaborating with the University of Wyoming Extension, 4-H youth and students from Arapaho School to work with our Elders in planting and gardening. We added an additional patio in the front of our building, so Elders can watch life around them and visit with their families outside on warm, summer days. We included a memory walk and gazebo. Our Elders can enjoy the memory walk with their families or enjoy a cup of coffee and read the newspaper while outside. We placed a portable fire pit on our patio, so we can have hot dogs and s'mores in the summer evenings. A warm summer night might find the Elders of Morning Star sitting on our new patio, enjoying fireworks and looking at the stars.

We began having annual community carnivals with bouncy houses, live music, dunk tanks, petting zoo, cotton candy and children's laughter. We had our first fall community festival with live music, hot apple cider, hot chocolate and treats.

Our Elders started taking trips to go fishing, to attend picnics or walks to the river. Our Elders enjoy traveling to see our Tribe's new buffalo herd, visit the Big Horn Sheep Center or attend a local Pow-wow, Sundance or go bowling. We entered floats in the parade and sponsored a community Nursing Home Awareness Walk. Our Elder Walk recognizes not only the Elders who live in our community, but our Elder employees who work very hard every day at Morning Star. The community began to enter our doors again. The students from all the local schools started visiting and come to spend time with us. Smiles and

laughter started to flow freely. And Morning Star gained momentum, breathed deeper, and our drum beat louder and can now be heard.

We initiated open dining, and our Elders began to wake up when they wanted. They learned they could eat when and what they wanted. Our Elders learned it is okay to say they do not like a particular food, and they do not have to eat it. There are always other choices. They enjoy the foods of their heritage and getting to dine with their families. Our Elders can go to our



The annual Elder Awareness Walk:
Elders, staff, families and community members

local school's basketball games, so they can watch their grandchildren play. They also love attending the school's culture night and visiting with relatives and other members of the community. We go on shopping trips, health fairs and community-sponsored events. Some of our Elders like to just sit and gaze at our beautiful Wind River Mountains, and that is okay.

During this same time period, other Native nursing homes across America and in Alaska felt the need to collaborate and focus on the Native traditions that are so important to our Elders. A group was formed in the fall of 2015, and Morning Star joined its ranks. It is known as UNITE: Uniting

Nursing Homes in Tribal Excellence. The collaboration saw the need to allow Native nursing homes to have traditional foods and establish best practices with the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS). UNITE is now a nonprofit corporation representing the needs and best practices of Native American Elders and Alaskan Natives across the United States. Using these best practices, Morning Star accepted our first deer and first elk from community members. Our Elders are enjoying this healthy meat. Traditional dried meat and chokecherries are being incorporated. Local singers and drummers visit us and sing traditional songs, and we dance. The local schools bring their students, and we enjoy traditional dances and song. We have also started focusing on bringing the traditional languages and traditional cedaring into our home. Cedaring is a ceremony for the native culture used to cleanse the air, body and soul. When Native Americans gather, they start with a prayer and a cedar blessing. There are many kinds of cedar, and each tribe recognizes each strain differently. It is a great honor to participate in these rituals.

The latest member to join our family is a little, white dog named Star. She was found on the highway, injured after being hit by a car. Our Elders love her! She meanders down the halls and room to room to check on every Elder in our community. Baby chicks now come to live at Morning Star every spring. The Elders enjoy watching them out in the yard, complete with their own chicken coop. Our Elders watch them grow and take turns feeding them.

We do not believe our Elders come to Morning Star to die. They come to live! The human habitat we have created allows our Elders to continue life with plants, children and animals. It allows our Elders and community children to have a life worth living! As we continue our journey with laughter, song, music and activities that fill our building, we know we have created a home and community where people are loved. The institutional bonds have been removed. The heartbeat of Morning Star, our drum, beats clearly, strongly and loudly. Our Sacred Circle is complete.



Drum Group: Prays, plays and sings throughout the annual Elder Awareness Walk and the lunch