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American Indian Girls Softball Team Brings Home the Gold

For Immediate Release: Valley Center, Ca.**** TEAM Cali 16-U, a team of American Indian girls returned home to their San Diego and Riverside County reservations richer than they left. The athletes from nine local tribes won the Gold Medal in baseball, and a first time victory for California, in the 2011 United States Indigenous Games, held in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

The 15 member team competed in the combined Under 16-and 19-category, and represented the Rincon, Sycuan, Soboba, Pala, Viejas Pauma, La Jolla, Barona and Torres Martinez tribes in the games, which are held every two years. Manny Boyle, of the San Pasqual Band, also earned the title of Gold Medal Champion in the wrestling weight 130-135 pound competition.

“This was the first time we entered a team,” stated Michelle Nelson, the organizer and general manager. “The girls were great, they went there to win and they did.” Nelson works for the Rincon Recreation Department, organizing events for the Indian Communities. Someday, she would like to see the games held in California.

Team Cali 16-U, competed against nine teams, winning the best out of five games, the final playoff was against a highly favored Wisconsin team, which was defeated by the Cali 16-U team.

The organizers and girls raised \$8,000 to travel to the games with a number of tribes and individuals contributing. Nelson praised her tribe for their support in helping to fulfill the girls’ dream of taking part in the 2011 Indigenous Games. She added that “without the support of local Tribal Chairman Robert Smith of the Pala Band, we would have had to work even harder for the additional funds to pay for airfare.” Nelson also thanked the numerous individual community members that contributed to the cause as well.

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Modeled after the Olympic Games, thousands of athletes and more than 500 American Indian tribes participated. It is the largest sports competition for American native youth, and attracts thousands of spectators and supporters. In addition to baseball, competitions included archery, boys and girls basketball, cross county, boys and girls' golf, shotgun shooting, softball, track and field and wrestling.

"It was a ton of work, but seeing our girls in the Procession of Champions and standing on the platform with their gold medal, we were so proud," stated Nelson.

"In that moment, we didn't even remember all that went into training, getting to the event and winning. We were just happy for them that they were a part of this event."

According to Nelson, it was a four month process of try outs and screenings to pick the team. Then, there are the practices, requiring a real commitment. The multiple tryouts and screenings were to ensure that anyone who wanted to participate had a fair shake to qualify for the team.

"In addition to honing their softball skills, the girls learned discipline, acquired leadership skills, and bonded as friends.

"And much more, they met other tribal youth from throughout the United States and participated in Native cultural, arts, entertainment and spiritual activities associated with the games," she noted.

Assisting Nelson, were Richard Lavato of the Pala Band; Ashley Skaggs, and Marilyn Arres from the Soboba Band; and Michele Parada from Rincon. Nelson had praise for the assistance. "All the adults volunteered our time, and I am so grateful and appreciative of their sacrifices and what they helped the girls accomplish," she added.

"This experience will stay with the girls throughout their life and inspire them to always set high goals and fulfill their dreams, stated Nelson, who added a special thanks to Richard Lavato, the team coach, "for the exhausting hours he spent with the girls and the important work of teaching them the fundamentals of softball."

Members of Team Cali 16-U were:

Martina Calac	Catcher
Victoria Smith	Second Base
Mariah Bentiste	First Base
Kateri Rodriguez	Pitcher
Shania Lopez	Right Field

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Rendy Bow	Pitcher
Shane Hyde	Fist Base
Andrea Torres	Short Stop
Feather Trujillo	Center Field

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Note: Attached is a photo of Michelle Nelson, Organizer and General Manager of the Girls Softball team, and Richard Lavato, team coach.