The words “Native American Reservation” might conjure an image of an expansive Southwestern landscape, or maybe a Casino. But for the 45,000 Native Americans in the Bay Area, the reservation looks a little different: It’s a squat brick building on a busy intersection in Oakland.

The Intertribal Friendship House is one of the only community centers for Native Americans in the entire Bay Area. It was created in 1955, during the time of the Urban Indian Relocation Act, when the government moved tens of thousands of Native Americans from their rural homes across the country to cities like Salt Lake City, Denver, Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. The program was designed to bring Native people out of the poverty of the reservation and give them access to the opportunities of city life. The Intertribal Friendship House has become a home away from home for Native people ever since.

A home away from home

A floor to ceiling mural decorates the back wall of a large meeting hall. It depicts familiar sites from the Bay Area like Alcatraz and the Bay Bridge alongside images of traditional Ohlone houses and the brick building we are now inside of: The Intertribal Friendship House. Three long tables are set up for at least 80 people to sit and eat. It’s Elder’s Day here and pretty much every one of those seats are taken by a senior. They are talking and joking and playing Bingo while they finish up lunch before the next activity.

Angela Hupaya is darting in and out from the kitchen, clearing off dirty plates and bringing dessert out to the old folks. She is one of a handful of people under 65 here today.

“I’m just here to help out with elders day but also utilize the services,” Hupaya says. Today she’ll also make use of the Friendship House's computers.

Hupaya is in her mid 30s and has a big, warm smile. She seems at home at the Friendship House, which is no surprise since she's been coming here for baby showers, birthdays, and Christmases since she was a little girl.

"It's like coming to your Auntie's house to come to eat, have fun, and see everybody," Hupaya says.

Hupaya can focus on her job search here because others help look after her little daughter, Phelina.

"That's something I love, since I am a single mother with not much family," Hupaya says. "That this is my extended family".

Hupaya repays the favor. Today, she has promised to take Phelina and some other kids swimming, after Bingo.

Multicultural urbanites

Hupaya belongs to more than one tribe – she is part Klamath, Ponca, and Peruvian – but connecting with those roots in Oakland can be a challenge.

"Being in the urban setting I never had the opportunity to know what is a traditional food. How do we make it? What are the benefits of it? So we are trying to gear back to our old ways," Hupaya says.

The mix of elders here teach her about all of her different cultures, and theirs. Hupaya says she learns about "their traditional foods, their jewelry making, specific to their tribe. It's like the United Nations Center for everyone just coming together and learning from each other."

Although several rural reservations around the country are shared by two or three tribes, the Intertribal Friendship House is unusual in that it sees people

from more than 100 different tribes. About 8,000 people participate in the programs here every year.

Resilience in the face of change

The Bingo is still going on in the meeting hall, but not all of the elders are playing, some are just here to see their friends.

“These people in the senior meeting are people I’ve known for 30 or 40 years,” says Diane Williams.

Williams is a talkative and intelligent woman in her late 60’s. She is Koyukon Athabascan of Alaska, but grew up as an army brat in the South and went to college in the Midwest before moving to the Bay Area in 1977. Williams had not heard about the Intertribal Friendship House until she saw an ad for a job there, for a community health worker. She got the job and the House quickly became the center of her life.

“I remember I used to live on 9th Avenue – not far from here – and on every corner on every block there was a Native family,” Williams says. “And so the Native people have been displaced from here. So it’s changed dramatically like that.”

The rapidly rising cost of living in the Bay Area is affecting the community center.

“The house has also almost closed down during hard fiscal times and we almost lost it many times but the community sort of keeps rallying together,” Williams says.

She says she sees the strength of the Oakland community coming through in many different ways.

“We have a really resilient population in the cities, compared to some of the reservations where there’s high rates of suicide – and we don’t find that here in the city which is one good marker in our community,” she says.

Williams says that’s because “we have our spiritual ways and I think that is the overall strength of our community is our medicine people. We have our original instructions for this earth.”

Native Americans are not moving to the Bay Area in the same way as during the Indian Relocation Act in the 1950s, but Native people who are new in town still find their way here.

“I tried it out one Thursday. They had a dance practice and I just liked it. It was community you could feel it,” says Theoren Lulua.

Lulua was 17 years old when he moved with his mom to Oakland from Canada, just three years ago. Lulua was raised on a reservation in British Columbia where he spent much of his time outdoors. Even though there are a whole lot more cars, concrete, and people around, he says that Friendship House reminds him of home, mostly.

“But it’s not exactly the same thing you would get from a regular reservation – things like the deer meat and hunting, going out camping all the time,” Lulua explains. “We’re limited to our resources here but we make what we have and I like it.”

Lulua knows how easy it is to lose touch with one’s heritage without the opportunity to be part of it everyday.

“When I was a younger kid I didn’t speak English. My grandparents refused to speak English to me and spoke to me in a native tongue until I was about five. Then they put me in a regular school that’s when they taught me English and I just forgot a lot of everything,” Lulua explains.

He has been able to get back in touch with his Native roots at the Intertribal Friendship House, and now he is creating programs that will do the same for others. The Intertribal Friendship House turns 60 this year and Lulua and the other youth organizers are making sure they stay open for another generation, or two.