**Lakota Indian Reservation, Pine Ridge, South Dakota**

**June 9 – 13, 2014**

**Charlene Louie - Reflective Essay**

On June 9th, 2014, a group from my school, Sacred Heart Cathedral Preparatory (located in San Francisco, CA), and I landed in Rapid City, South Dakota. The group consisted of five young ladies, including myself, interested in the world of microfinance and economics. Ms. Abi Basch, our upcoming Civics/Economics and AP Government teacher, was our group leader throughout this trip. All six of us came to South Dakota to experience the benefits of microfinance first hand. We were primarily intent on examining the benefits microfinance has brought to the Lakota Native American Reservation (Pine Ridge Indian Reservation). We were also very excited to be meeting a group of students from Southwind High School in Memphis, TN, that had been studying microfinance for the past two years under a grant project. There was an immediate connection between the two groups and I am happy to say that at the end of the week we left each other as family.

Driving to the Pine Ridge Reservation, I had no idea what to expect. I have never been on a Native American Reservation before, and the only remote ideas I had of the reservation were generated from watching a forty minute documentary on the Pine Ridge Reservation called, ***Hidden America: Children of the Plains***.  The documentary portrayed the reservation as a place full of poverty, but a sanctuary for Lakota culture.

Upon reaching the Pine Ridge Reservation, I discovered that the reservation was very spread out. One house would be about five to seven miles away from another house. It was very surprising to see, since I always thought the Native Americans were all about community and wanted to stay as close as together as possible. I also counted one grocery store and two to three schools driving deeper into the reservation. This showed me the lack of infrastructure the reservation contained and changed my whole perception of Native American reservations.

Our first stop on the reservation was the headquarters of Tanka Bars. This was a very relevant visit to our trip’s focus as the company originally began with a microfinance loan and now sells to large retailers, such as Whole Foods and REI, all over the United States. Tanka Bars are gourmet buffalo jerky mixed with local herbs and dried fruits, to recreate a Lakota traditional dish, *wasna*. The company tries their best to allow the Lakota nation to move forward and advance as a nation economically, while still holding on to traditional Lakota values. These Lakota values include honoring the importance of the buffalo and respecting the ecosystem. Since the Lakota people have some of the highest diabetes and obesity rates in the country due to a primary diet of less expensive “junk” food, Tanka Bars are a solution to decrease these staggering numbers. When the company began, it had no collateral so financing through a commercial bank was not a possibility. So, they borrowed microfinance loans from smaller donors without which there would be no Tanka Bars. This shows the critical value microfinance has upon the Lakota nation, and how it could help create other small businesses on the reservation, that still respect the Lakota culture and ways of doing business.

After the tour, we drove further into the reservation to the site where we were going to stay for the following days—the Red Cloud Renewable Energy Center. This renewable energy center was founded by Henry Red Cloud, the direct fifth generation descendant of Chief Red Cloud. Henry Red Cloud was very aware of how much poverty the Lakota nation was experiencing and how dismal their living conditions were, so he wanted to make an improvement. This improvement turned out to be the energy center providing his fellow Lakotas with green technology through Lakota Solar Enterprises, a renewable energy company he himself founded. Lakota Solar Enterprises also helps the Lakota by producing employment opportunities, which in turn provides a higher standard of living for those that are now receiving paychecks.

The first night at the Red Cloud Renewable Energy Center, we encountered Henry Red Cloud’s family who lived right next to us in a mobile home. It was very clear that there were more people living in the mobile home than the mobile home was intended to hold. This is one of the many examples of how Native Americans treasure their family. It is very common for three or more generations to live in a household. Native Americans for the most part, never turn away a family member who needs a place to live. Although this is a very nice act of kindness, overcrowding mixed with the lack of utilities most mobile homes possess, generates critical health risks for families. A better housing system within Native American reservations can truly make a greater difference. It can thoroughly eradicate health problems and poverty as well.

Another way poverty can be eradicated throughout the reservation is by providing education for all. On the second day of our trip, we visited the Red Cloud Indian School. The school accommodates students from kindergarten to high school who pass a certain test and are able to pay a fee of $100-$200 per year. Our tour guide was an alumna from the school and told us how the education she received from the Red Cloud Indian School transformed her life. She graduated from college and now wants to give back to the Pine Ridge community with the education she earned.

Education not only eradicates poverty from the reservation, but also can also prevent suicides. Teen suicide rates on the reservation are four times the national rates. These staggering numbers of suicides are due to the lack of attention children and teens are getting from their parents and from the hopelessness of a future that offers no jobs and no escape from a sub-standard of living. School is a way for them to obtain the skills and tools they need to go on to college and change their futures. School is also a place that provides a second home with teachers that care. That is why these students do so well in class and have so much motivation to thrive in school. Students are willing to commute hours to school and hours back home just to obtain an education. Our tour guide stated that at least one student from Red Cloud’s graduating high school class gets accepted and goes to Stanford for college every year. She also informed us that most of the graduates are Gates Millennium scholars. All of these statistics really made me respect the school’s mission and become more grateful about how much attention my parents give me. I learned not to take my education for granted and it gave me a reality check that so many other people out there cannot acquire an education as easily as I can.

Another problem on the reservation that contributes to a continual life of poverty is the rate of alcoholism. Pine Ridge is a dry reservation, which means that it is illegal for alcohol to be sold or consumed on the reservation. Pine Ridge residents look for other ways to procure alcohol, primarily traveling to White Clay, Nebraska, just 10 minutes over the border of Pine Ridge. White Clay sells approximately $4.5 million dollars of alcohol annually yet none of that revenue is available to the reservation. Alcoholism destroys family life and motivation for adults to obtain jobs. It is a vicious cycle. Individuals live in such extreme poverty with no hope for a better future or means to support their families so they start drinking; yet, once they start drinking they are incapable of working or striving towards making their lives more palpable. Currently, the Lakota reservation is holding hearings on reversing the “dry county” law to enable tribal-run liquor stores on the reservation to ensure that any revenue stays on the reservation. Pundits believe that this debate will continue for some time to come as there is much resistance from the tribal elders.

High rates of obesity and diabetes are other primary issues the reservation experiences. These issues are primarily due to malnutrition. Lakota rely on fatty foods especially fast foods and sodas as these foods are a lot cheaper than preparing a healthy beneficial meal. They only have four grocery stores located on the entire reservation. I had the chance to visit and shop at one of the grocery stores and I saw that the foods mostly sold there were chips, sodas, and a lot of processed foods. There were barely any vegetables and fruits sold at all. Fresh food is expensive, which hinders the Lakota from eating healthy. Unfortunately, due to lack of education and availability of healthcare many Lakota do not even realize the damage they are doing to their bodies from their eating habits. This, along with other factors and hardships, leads to an average mortality of 55 years compared to the remainder of the United States at 80 years.

During the trip, I found myself constantly comparing the poverty on the Pine Ridge Reservation with the poverty in San Francisco. Eighty-five to ninety-five percent of Pine Ridge’s residents are unemployed and 97% of residents live below the federal poverty line. In San Francisco, 4.2% of citizens are unemployed and 13.2% of citizens live below the federal poverty line. These statistics were very surprising to me since I always thought that San Francisco held one of the highest poverty rates in the nation, but San Francisco’s poverty rates do not even compare with the poverty rates of the Pine Ridge Reservation. Also, in San Francisco there are a lot of homeless people, but on the reservation there were barely any homeless. This must be because Native Americans can never say no to let anyone stay at their homes.

This trip to the Pine Ridge Reservation was truly an eye-opening experience. It taught me a lot about how microfinance can help benefit a community. I began to realize that I should be more grateful and appreciative for what I have as well. The Lakota culture that surrounded me during the trip also made me want to travel more places to become more aware of other countries and cultures around me. With my experience and wisdom that I acquired on this trip, I want to promote more awareness of the struggles of the Lakota community. An idea I had to execute this plan was to sell Tanka Bars at my school in order to raise money for the Red Cloud Indian School to provide their students with devices such as laptops and computers. Another idea was to hold an assembly dedicated to promoting more awareness of the Pine Ridge Native Americans’ struggles. I hope that I am able to work with my school and my other fellow Kiva leaders to follow through with these plans and share our experience with many other people.

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