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

**June 9 – 13, 2014**

**Precious Listana - Reflective Essay**

There is a saying that the “winners write our history”. Such winners gradually “conquered” 9,827 million square kilometers of territory that would eventually be labeled as the United States of America. Expansion of this territory forced the removal or the assimilation of the original inhabitants of North America, the Native Americans. Despite the historical upheaval, their culture still continues to thrive, especially that of the Lakota Sioux of the Oglala Nation on the Pine Ridge Reservation, South Dakota. Living with the challenges of unemployment, lack of educational opportunities, poor healthcare (if any), and forced assimilation, it is no wonder that the hopelessness of the situation leads many to alcohol and drug abuse. The Lakota Sioux are a proud people who continue to cling to their culture as a means to mitigate every form of poverty in their community.

**Unemployment**

The Pine Ridge Reservation, located in Shannon County, is the second largest reservation in the United States and suffers from a significant 85 – 95% unemployment rate (as compared to the current national unemployment rate of 6.1%). In order for a community to thrive, employment opportunities must be available and sustainable. Without jobs, individuals have no money which then has a trickle-down effect on consumers who cannot purchase anything, businesses then fail, and communities lose revenue that could be reinvested to build further opportunities. This self-perpetuating and circular flow of unemployment forces many people to live in poverty and contributes to intergenerational poverty that once started is extremely difficult to break.

Despite their dismal economic situation, many Lakota residents find some income by selling their hand-made crafts to tourists. For example, Jimmy, a Lakota vendor, approached our group with high hopes of selling his crafts. Before buying a simple yet elegant pair of butterfly earrings for my little sister, I asked him if he loves his job. He humbly explained that he had no other option. With the high unemployment rate, he needed to make money; creating jewelry was his best solution to staying productive and positive.

Kaylee, another Lakota vendor we met, sells her hand-made jewelry and dream-catchers to tourists visiting the Wounded Knee Massacre Memorial. On the reservation, it is extremely easy to lose hope and get tangled in the cycle of alcohol and drug abuse. But Kaylee is a different story; she works to pay for her education to become a nurse in a local community hospital. Both Jimmy and Kaylee harness their artistic and entrepreneurial talents in order to survive and hopefully prosper in order to provide their families a better standard of living.

While many on the reservation choose to sell their crafts to offset unemployment, some of them are lucky enough to find employment through organizations such as the Lakota Solar Enterprises (LSE). Founded in 2006 by Henry Red Cloud, a 5th generation descendent of the infamous Chief Red Cloud, and working in conjunction with the nonprofit organization Trees, Water & People (TWP), LSE offers hope for the future on the reservation by offering advanced technology of solar energy to provide sources that will allow the Lakota Reservation to become “energy independent.” LSE provides paid training for green jobs at the Red Cloud Renewable Energy Center (RCREC) located on the reservation. This training offers the chance for individuals to learn about solar energy while also providing much-needed employment experience. The LSE, along with TWP, have had 150 tribal interns and 40 of them even earned their Solar Technician I certification from RCREC. With their newly acquired knowledge and skills, they can return to their homes and start their own renewable energy programs. The use of renewable energy not only affords better living conditions by providing heat for individuals that often have none in the harsh winters that can drop to temperatures of -60°F, but also creates future economic development and growth through employment and entrepreneurship. Most importantly, the business remains true to the Lakota tradition of honoring Mother Earth by utilizing the natural resources that are already available to the people.

**Educational Opportunities**

Education, viewed as a necessity and a means to climb out of poverty, is in a sad state on the reservation. The school system struggles with attempting to provide the necessary education while dealing with shortages in facilities, supplies, teachers, and transportation. According to the U.S. Department of Education and the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Pine Ridge schools are ranked in the bottom 10% of national school funding. Additionally, many students are forced to drop out of school in order to assist their families in providing food and shelter. It is not surprising that the annual school dropout rate is over 70% (almost 7 times more than the national average). Currently, the teacher turnover rate is 800% higher than in other parts of the U.S. due to the isolation of Pine Ridge and low pay. These factors force schools to hire inexperienced teachers to fill the open positions. How can a student achieve when there is a lack of basic resources, lack of experienced teachers, and constant instability in their home lives? It is no wonder that so many students opt to drop out of school and attempt to enter the workforce; unfortunately, without a high school diploma, their employment options are extremely limited.

Fighting this pervasively high dropout rate is the Red Cloud Indian School, a private institution that promotes both Lakota and Jesuit values. Approximately 95% of its annual operating budget (about $13 million) is received from private donors and grants. The resources and education the students are afforded at Red Cloud allows them to move on to post-secondary education and in due course return to the reservation with their expertise and experience to give back to the Pine Ridge community. An example of this is Rilda Means, the school’s Community Relations Associate. Rilda graduated from Red Cloud in 2005 and went on to finish a Bachelor's degree in Political Science and American Indian Studies at Oglala Lakota College. Her next goal is to become a tribal lawyer. She is a prime example of a young individual that believed in remaining on the reservation to make a difference among her people. The Red Cloud School develops future young leaders to recognize the problems in their community and to use their education as a pathway to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty that abounds on the reservation.

**Assimilation**

“*In the future, I want to teach people about our culture because no one really knows our REAL culture*,” Majesty, a Native American dancer working at the Crazy Horse Memorial, reminded our group. Before going on this trip, I thought that Native Americans still lived in tipis and wore their tribal outfits every day—a common misconception of my generation. It is crucial to develop cultural awareness of the Lakota Sioux since their culture is slowly becoming “extinct.” Roughly only 20% of the residents on the reservation know how to speak fluent Lakota. Subjugation of a people by force or through gradual assimilation tends to tear away the very foundation of a culture and its’ origins. It ends up leaving behind a generation that is Lakota in name only.

Leonard Little Finger, founder of the Lakota Circle Village, aims to preserve the Lakota language through education at the Sacred Circle School. The Sacred Circle School teaches the Lakota language to the future generation so that they may become reinvigorated with their Lakota identity. He also teaches the children the concept of “tobtobki” which addresses the belief that one does not need to go outward to find themselves when everything one needs to know is already inside in their soul. This creates a value system of a community that is connected through mind, body, and soul to work with their existing environment to create a better life for all.

In addition to reviving the Lakota language, the older generation aims to preserve their rich spiritual practices. Pow-wows and sweat lodges unite the Lakota Sioux to honor Wakan Tanka, their creator, their Great Spirit and to re-ignite their rich culture. Luckily, I was able to participate in a sweat lodge ceremony. Even though I am not a polytheist, I felt the presence of a greater spirit during the prayers and rituals of our leader. As sweat poured down my face to my entire body, I could not help but think how majestic their culture truly is. It is hard to fathom that our past leaders wanted to control the Lakota Sioux, “to kill the Indian, but save the man.” Learning about the struggles of the preservation of their culture inspired me, as it has many others, to revitalize and reengage with our own culture. Leonard Little Finger believes that, “*Without learning about our culture, we won’t know our past; therefore, we won’t know our present. We won’t know our true identity.*”

**Alcohol and Drug Abuse**

Per tribal law, Pine Ridge Reservation is legally “dry” meaning that sales and consumption of alcohol is illegal on the reservation. However, less than 2 miles from the reservation, the city of White Clay, Nebraska, has 4 beer stores and 1 market. Annually, the owners of the 4 beer stores sell approximately 4.5 million 12-ounce cans of beer to the Lakota Sioux which averages out to 12,500 cans daily. The businesses make almost $5 million each year in revenue from mostly unemployed Lakota.

The entire reservation is greatly affected by the cycle of alcohol and drug abuse due to its easy accessibility; however, the excessive use of alcohol and drugs especially affects the youth, even before birth. For example, the infant mortality rate is five times higher than the national average while “1 in 4 children are born with fetal alcohol disorder.” Preventing the growth of alcohol consumption is one of the ongoing projects that the Lakota Sioux elders are working towards to pave a safer and healthier community for everyone, especially the youth.

**Alleviating Poverty**

Life on the reservation is not another sob story. Instead, it is a story of perseverance and resilience. The Lakota Sioux continue to preserve and honor their culture despite all of their obstacles with unemployment, under-education, forced assimilation, and alcohol and drug abuse.

There are multiple solutions to combat these obstacles. Here is a strategic outline to help mitigate poverty on the reservation: 1) understand and respect their culture, 2) raise awareness about microfinance and entrepreneurship, 3) improve the education system, 4) provide resources for the youth, and 5) connect with organizations that are already trying to alleviate poverty on the reservation. This outline is not the penultimate solution to alleviate poverty, but rather a tool to restore their culture and provide opportunities for all.

***Understand and Respect Their Culture***

The Lakota Sioux have experienced a great deal of upheaval in their history, resulting in the loss of community structure and support. Before “suggesting” changes to the people on the reservation, we must first understand their culture. They should not be subjected to feel the pressures of assimilation through our suggested “changes”. Instead, we must create a strong bond of friendship coupled with productive dialog. As one of our teachers told us at our nightly group meeting, “*Don’t give us what you think we want or need; ask us what we want and need.”*

***Raise Awareness about Microfinance and Entrepreneurship***

The success of microfinance (lending of small amounts of money to individuals/groups that are unable to secure loans from commercial banks due to credit or lack of collateral) on a global scale in developing areas as a tool to eradicate poverty and promote entrepreneurship, sustainability, and an increased standard of living is indisputable. As a group we witnessed the success of companies on the reservation such as Tanka Bars and Bow-Ki’s Bakery and Flower Shop which received microfinance loans to start their businesses. Imagine the possibilities of funding other entrepreneurs to start businesses which in turn will create jobs, provide income, and promote economic growth and development for the reservation as a whole.

One of the benefits of microfinance lending is that the organizations providing the loans require the individuals to go through training classes to learn all aspects of running a business from budgeting to inventory to marketing. Education is continuous throughout the life of the loan and enables business owners to have a higher chance of success and financial stability.

***Improve the Education System***

According to Thomas Jefferson, “*Education is the key to success.*” The youth of today are tomorrow’s future, and, if encouraged or even mandated to pursue an education, will ultimately create a better society. Most importantly, those that receive an education can then educate others about effective methods to bring positive change and open the door to a myriad of opportunities. The school system must be fully funded in order to provide the quality education that is found in cities across the United States. Additionally, parents must be aware that the income that might be lost now while a child is attending school will be returned ten-fold if they become an engineer, lawyer, doctor, etc. Without the support of the entire community to enforce the value of education, the high school dropout rate will continue and poverty will move on to the next generation.

***Provide Resources for the Youth***

Similar to improving the education system, resources must be available for the youth. Without the necessary resources to learn in school, success is farfetched. For example, we met a very talented, young artist named Mae, who showed us her anime drawings in her notebook. While her imagination and love for art is limitless, her resources are, so she does not have the opportunity to develop her drawing talent. Mae epitomizes one of the numerous youth in need of basic resources to develop their interests. In order to address this issue, youth can apply for donations through crowd-funding websites such as Kickstarter and Fundly. Exploring ones’ talent, outside of academics, is a necessary and essential tool to developing future career success.

***Connect with Organizations***

There is a saying that work is easier when done in groups. In this situation, collaborative efforts will lead all of us one step closer to our goal to alleviate poverty. For example, Henry Red Cloud connected with Trees, Water & People to create environment-friendly jobs while also teaching the Lakota the importance of going “green”. Henry Red Cloud’s job became easier because he worked with others to achieve a common goal for the Lakota Sioux. Just like Henry Red Cloud, we can all reach out to specific organizations working towards a goal we want to achieve.

Alleviating poverty on the reservation is a work in progress. The Lakota Sioux cannot do it alone. They need all of us to help create small acts of change. With time and collaborative efforts, the Pine Ridge Reservation will break from the cycle of poverty and become the powerful nation that it once used to be.

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