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

**June 9 – 13, 2014**

**Samantha Pioli - Reflective Essay**

A wise instructor once told our class that “perception is reality.” In other words, he was saying that despite the actual reality of the situation, the only truth that arises from the situation comes from the fantasized perceptions of the human mind. This wise instructor was applying this phrase to the conflict of the North and the South during the “disputed decade” of 1950, but the validity of this statement is applicable to modern day society.

The majority of us are overwhelmed with various academics and a plethora of co-curricular activities that there is little time left to actually think about the world outside of our own. And, sometimes, when we stay sheltered from the actual world, we create perceptions that are untrue. Here is where the problem lies—our sometimes misguided perceptions become our “reality.” If our “reality” is based on untrue perceptions, crises can never be properly solved. That is why being correctly informed on an issue is vital, especially an issue that deals with complex facets of history, religion, culture, and economics.

This past June I was lucky enough to visit the Lakota Indian Reservation in Pine Ridge, South Dakota and learn the rich and vibrant culture of a proud people. For five days, myself and a group of nine other students accompanied by two instructors, attempted to tackle the multi-faceted problem that persists on the reservation—extreme poverty. Poverty in any place is hard to remedy but not impossible. One of the tools that our group examined as a method of eradicating poverty was the use of microfinance. Microfinance is small loans that can be received without collateral or a history of documented credit. The goal is to lend money to individuals and/or groups that they can build small businesses into solid establishments that are not only able to repay the original microfinance loans but earn a profit.

I believe that you cannot begin to tackle a complex issue without fully understanding the situation and contributing factors. To be honest, before watching the documentary “*Hidden America: Children of the Plains”* by Diane Sawyer, I believed that all Native Americans still lived in tipis. Education of Native Americans in our schools is one of abysmal neglect as very little is learned of one of the most important components of American history. I did not truly understand the situation nor comprehend the underlying factors contributing to the statistics I was provided on Pine Ridge before our trip.

Pine Ridge Reservation, the size of Connecticut with an estimated population of 44,000, is a sovereign nation on the soil of the United States. In terms of politics and economics, not only do the Lakota have to adhere to tribal law, but also to state and federal law, which are constantly at odds with each other. In terms of history and culture, their ancestors lived on the land a long time ago before the New World was discovered; the land is sacred, especially the area known as the Black Hills. In the past decade or so, there has been an amazing revival of the Lakota culture within the boundaries of the reservation. They are a proud people with a distinct story to tell about the historically rich land that they currently reside on.

The situation on the reservation is just so complex, especially if you factor in alcoholism, suicide rates, obesity and diabetes, condition and/or lack of housing. Many of the families are struggling just to survive with a GDP per capita of less than $3,600/per year per family.

Even though our group was not exposed to the extreme cases of poverty on the reservation, but we did witness the corroding trailers that could possibly be housing a family of 15 to 18 people with only three bedrooms. We knew about the situations that a majority of these families have to face, but we were ultimately sheltered from the hard-core reality of it.

The face of poverty is very different in Pine Ridge than it is in San Francisco. In San Francisco, people sleep on the streets and you can see what is happening where you live. In Pine Ridge, the Lakota believe in an open door policy and that everyone has a home so we witnessed multiple people staying in corroding trailers usually without heating and cooling with minimal space. The difference is that you do not see what is happening in Pine Ridge and that has to be one of the scariest things that I could imagine.

The most hard-hitting thing that we all witnessed was the town of White Clay, Nebraska. Pine Ridge is legally considered a “dry county” meaning there are no sales or consumption of alcohol allowed on the reservation. Unfortunately, White Clay is just a few minutes down the road, no larger than a football field long, that made $6 million last year between four bars run by 14 Caucasian males. We saw people sitting on the sidewalk at 4 o’clock in the afternoon either completely intoxicated or becoming so. There was a sign with big bold red letters that greets you prior to entering the town that says “Stop the Abuse.” There is another sign as you are leaving the town heading back towards the reservation that reads “Death to the White Man.” Although I am from a large city and have witnessed many things, I have never witnessed anything so strongly emotional if my entire life. It was haunting and the images have remained with me.

Yet there was an amazing ray of light that emerged through all the darkness we had seen and heard about. That light was the hearts and hopes of several individuals that spoke of the future of the reservation, their historical lands, and their culture. Henry Red Cloud, a direct descendent of Chief Red Cloud, preached the idea of “green” initiatives by creating a company that manufactures solar air collectors and solar heating systems to enable sustainable energy on the reservation. Lakota Solar Enterprises, founded in 2006, is the first 100% owned Native American owned and operated renewable energy companies. Through a partnership with Trees, Water, and People, they are providing power and heat to individuals that have none and are also providing employment and training to many Lakota on the reservation. Staying true to his culture, Henry Red Cloud’s mission for his company is to “*reduce the dependency on polluting and destructive sources of energy, with a goal of helping this nation's people become energy independent*.”

We also had the opportunity to visit two businesses that were financed through microfinance loans—Tanka Bars and Bow-Ki’s Bakery and Florist. Tanka Bars has been able to grow from a small two-person production to one of the best-selling meat and fruit bars on the market being sold in locations such as Whole Foods and REI across the United States. Through hard work, innovation, and an unwavering desire to succeed, not only does the company continue to grow and employ Lakota from the reservation, but they are also preserving and celebrating their culture by utilizing old recipes and bringing back the bison to their land. Not only is bison meat better for you than regular meat, but the native bison has a natural place in the ecosystem of the prairie lands which creates a balance and order to the land.

The second business that we visited was Bow-Ki’s Bakery and Florist located in downtown Pine Ridge. It is a small store owned by a charming individual; Kimberly Trujillo received a microfinance loan to open a shop that not only offers regular bakery fare but also bakery items using traditional Lakota recipes that her grandmother taught her. Unfortunately, the business is struggling as there is not much disposable income for luxury items such as flowers and bakery items but she says that she will persevere in order to provide a better life for her family.

Lakota residents have an optimistic view of the future that radiates so much like the sun they believe energizes their spirits. This view is now focused on the younger generation in the hopes that they receive proper schooling and return to the reservation to preserve and develop the reservation. One of the most heart touching stories that we heard was from a young woman who recently graduated from Red Cloud Indian School. She told us a story about her younger brother who is attending college in Arizona. When he left for college he said that he never wanted to return to the reservation, but now he is studying to become a doctor so that can return to the reservation to help his community.

No one could summarize the entirety of the situation on the reservation better than Leonard Little Finger who teaches the native language of the Lakota to children under five years of age. Only about 2% of the population can speak Lakota and he has made it his mission to teach the next generation so the language is not lost. During his mini-lecture which actually turned out to be more of flowing story, he tied in each of the complex facets of the Lakota way—history, religion, culture, economics, and even politics. He wove these intricate facets into a perfectly round circle and I began to understand how everything connects and how vital each piece is to the solution of alleviating the problem of poverty on the reservation. He explained that we are all just caretakers of the earth for we cannot own something that will outlive us. As an environmentalist, that was one of the most beautiful things I have heard in my life.

Here I am—back from my eye-opening journey and I have a story to tell now that is not exactly my own, but a story of the people who generously shared their lives. I plan to share the stories with anyone who wants to listen. I have learned so much from this experience, both mentally and spiritually, that I truly believe that we can make a difference first through advocacy and awareness and secondly through proactive action to make change without changing the balance of the Lakota culture. I cannot wait to share my newfound knowledge and insights with my peers, co-workers, and instructors.

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