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

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**Trey Brewer - Reflective Essay**

The Pine Ridge Indian Reservation is home to over 40,000 people with over 2.8 million acres of land, which makes it the second largest reservation in the U.S and larger than Delaware and Rhode Island combined. Pine Ridge is breathtakingly beautiful and unpleasant at the same time. The majestic scenery of the Badlands and the Black Hills is almost spiritual. Unfortunately, the state of poverty on the reservation can be overwhelming to one not used to seeing this type of economic deprivation. For example, 85-95% of the residents are unemployed, 49% of the residents live below the federal poverty line, and the average yearly income is around $6,000 dollars which makes it the second poorest county in the United States. From an economic standpoint, they need help; although, mostly everyone I talked to felt they do not want or need help.

When we arrived on the reservation we saw many small homes, some with about 5 cars parked in the yard, which led me to believe there were a ton of people inside. We only saw about five businesses and they all were flooded with people. It makes you wonder why no one else starts a business there because it will get a bunch of traffic. That would also create a lot of jobs and be another major step in conquering poverty. I think that is why the poverty is the way that it is, there are not many businesses or places to work. They either lack goods and services or lack the purchasing power to allow businesses to flourish. It is a shame that some of the nicest people I have ever met are some of the most underprivileged.

The average income on the reservation last year was $6,000 dollars per year. Some people in the world make that much money in 10 minutes. There are people combatting poverty in Pine Ridge, for example, the Tanka Bar company. They donate money to local schools, and in my opinion, that is combatting poverty because education is the key to everything.

Although there are a lot of problems on the reservations, there are positive things as well. Some of the high school graduates have received scholarships to universities and then bring back their new knowledge and skills to the community. They have become teachers, doctors, and other great jobs that really help the community. They are excellent role models to not only their community, but the whole world. They are surrounded by severe poverty, alcoholics, and gangs but still manage to do their work and make excellent grades with a lot of negativity surrounding them. It takes a really strong willed person to be able to succeed while surrounded by all of these distractions.

Although the reservation’s poverty is more severe, my city is also very poverty struck. In Memphis, Tennessee, the average number of people under the United States poverty line is 29%, while on the Indian reservation the average is 49%. Memphis had the highest poverty rate in 2012 out of cities with a population of over 1,000,000, meaning Memphis has “more” poverty, but only because it has over one million residents. With the information I received from residents on the reservation, they do not desire any outside help building the reservation. They want to do it on their own. I believe it has much to do with pride and the history of the Lakota Indians. They believe in adequacy: having only enough to satisfy their basic wants and needs.

Many of the Lakota have close knit families, who strongly believe in passing on their culture to the younger generation. They thoroughly know their history; if you asked a question, they would have a response for you almost instantly. You also can see the passion in their eyes when they speak about their history and they love spreading knowledge of their past. It is very respectable how well they know their history because most people these days do not know or care where they came from.

I learned a lot on this short trip to South Dakota and met a bunch of great people that do not deserve to be in their current situation. This trip has really inspired me to do something with my life because I want to help these people. I want to give back and make other people happy. For all their poverty, the Lakota are some of the nicest and happiest people you will ever meet. It made me respect what I have a lot more, and I am sure it would have the same effect on most people.

Most people do not fully realize the full extent of poverty in America, and prior to my teacher contacting me about this trip, I did not either. We need to spread the word about this because these people do not deserve to live like this—no one does. I now have a new life goal to help people on the Lakota Indian Reservation. In conclusion, I would like to say *toksha ake* (see you later in the Lakota language) Pine Ridge.

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