



Mission of Love



*"You are not here to save the world, but to touch the hands that are within your reach."
~ Kathleen Price*

Subject: We, the Mission of Love ~ have created lasting relationships with the Lakota people. Kristi Walker

It has been over a month since I physically returned from the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. I emphasize "physically," because I still find my thoughts wandering, recalling the people I met, the experiences I had, and the work that we accomplished. As I finish writing this, another group from Mission of Love is at the Reservation attending Rose Spotted Bear's Headstone Memorial. I never met Rose, but was blessed to have spent some time with Hobart Spotted Bear, her husband.

Ironically, I began this passage sitting on a very high floor of a building in Chicago with a view of the entire city. As far as you can see, in three directions (the lake is toward the east) are buildings, houses, roads and highways. Contrast that to the Pine Ridge Reservation in which you can drive for an hour or two and not see a single home. The houses that were present seemed to be in small clusters. This vast difference in landscape, however, was not what captivated me during the week.

It was the Lakota people: Harry Yazzie, Delbert Charging Crow, Kevin Poor Bear, Josephine Standing Soldier, Leonard Little Finger, Rusty Pucket, Patricia Catches the Enemy; each with a different personality and different story.

After a two hour drive from Rapid City, our group arrived at the Lakota Prairie Ranch Resort in Kyle, managed by Rusty Pucket. After dinner in the restaurant, we went to our rooms or cabins to sleep. I later discovered that the Mission of Love had built the separate building in which I was staying, that was originally created for a different purpose and was later converted into additional motel rooms. As the week progressed, it was very obvious that Kathy and the Mission of Love had created very tangible gifts of buildings and homes, but had also created lasting relationships with the Lakota people.

The next morning started with a short introduction to the Lakota language and thus a glimpse into their culture. Bob Elston led this portion. He and his wife, Peg, and Tom Wilson who were present had been on multiple trips to Pine Ridge Reservation with Kathy and the Mission of Love and were a pivotal part of our volunteer team. Again, at the end of the week, I found myself in a van with Bob, Peg and Kathy as we traversed the reservation heading toward the Black Hills. The spirituality and richness of Lakota culture were an inherent part of the conversations, and my learning.



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During the week, we met Sandy, an entrepreneur and incredible cook, who requested a helping hand to assist her in taking one more step forward toward making her dream a reality. She had a home that she wanted to make into an internet café. While she was a student working on her advanced degree, she didn't have a place to study later in the evening, so she wanted to offer that, combined with her cooking, to others. The first day when we arrived at her home she had prepared an extravagant lunch for our group of over 20 people! Never have I witnessed such an outpouring of graciousness to people she didn't yet know. The next morning, she had prepared a full breakfast, with just as incredible food! To paraphrase what she stated much more eloquently, "It is what I can give and I am happy when people enjoy my food." A lot of hard work was done that day and the next by our group of volunteers. When it is all completed, I will certainly be one of her customers. Sandy is a teacher at the local college, and I also had the unique opportunity to watch her in action in the classroom. She cares so much for her students, and has instilled confidence and respect in them. As a visitor, Sandy had them teach me a Lakota greeting, demonstrating patience with me as I spoke new words and phrases. Sandy is a true selfless individual who I feel incredibly blessed to have met.

I met Kevin Poor Bear on the phone while we were driving from Rapid City. Kathy handed me the phone after saying what Kathy only can (as she will actually accomplish it), "I'd like you to meet Kristi. She is going to help get you a wheelchair and some legs." As both an individual and as a physical therapist, I felt both overwhelmed and empowered by Kathy's confidence. I spoke with Kevin on the phone, later met him and his wife, Josephine, at their home, and traveled with Kathy, Peg and the two of them to Rapid City on one of the last days we were there to witness Kevin getting measured for the sockets for his new prostheses. Kevin's eyes were beaming. Also, Kevin had been using a standard hospital-style wheelchair throughout the winter, because his lighter sporty chair was being fixed and the cost was too much for them at the time. The hospital-style chair with bilateral amputations is incredible unstable, especially having to traverse deep ruts and the steepness of his driveway. Kathy got Kevin back his wheelchair and the sparkle in his eyes as he popped an extended wheelie was contagious. Both Kevin and Josephine support themselves with their artwork; Kevin with his drawings and Josephine with her intricate beadwork. Also, a ride for four hours in a van with Kevin would not be complete without a stomachache because of laughing as Kevin rattled off zinger one-liners such as, "Why does an Indian not have to wait in line? He has a reservation." Though acutely aware of



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how the Indians, the term that is used freely with the Lakota people, were treated throughout history and how they still are treated, it is impossible to not laugh along with Kevin as he pokes fun at the situation. It is also made me want to work harder to increase awareness.

I met Harry Yazzie, or "Yazzie", as we all called him, when we drove up to his trailer to pick him up the third morning we were on the reservation on our way to work on Sandy's home. Yazzie came out when we pulled up, and what I immediately noticed, besides his stature, was that he had a cast on one leg and he was half-limping towards our van. After he got in the front seat of the van, Kathy asked him what happened. He explained that he had broken his leg a number of months ago during the winter. Kathy then proceeded to ask if he still wanted to come. He paused for a second, and then said quietly, "yes." I'm glad that he did, because, though I didn't know it at the time, I was going to have the opportunity to meet an amazing soul. From the time he got into our van until we left the reservation, Yazzie's gracious, humble, kind, giving and gentle spirit was present, but in a very understated way. As we drove, Kathy asked him about the past winter and Yazzie began to relate his experiences. When he broke his leg, the ambulance could only come part way up the road because of the snow, so a police car had to come to pick him up to bring him to the ambulance. He was taken to Rapid City and had to stay for a week, because the van only runs twice a week on Tuesdays and Thursdays between Rapid City and Pine Ridge. In January, he and his wife had a baby boy, named Kennedy Benally Yazzie, making the total number of children three, from newborn to seven years old. It became very clear how much he cares for his family as he spoke about his life and children throughout the week.

Yazzie's trailer has no running water, so Yazzie used crutches in the snow to get to the outhouse. It also has no heat and sometimes the winds could get up to 60 mph which scared him, because it felt like the trailer home would come off of its frame. With all of these challenges, Yazzie joined our group to lend his skill set, particularly his electrical skills to work on Sandy's house, without any expectation. As we all worked on Sandy's house that day, Yazzie was in a small area standing almost all day fixing her electric wiring, working through the pain. Later in the day, after convincing him to sit down and elevate his foot (the physical therapist in me emerged); he taught me how to wire electrical boxes with some assistance. The next day I watched as he instructed one of the guys on the trip in how to wire two overhead lights for the hallway. That evening over dinner with the entire group at our motel, I got a chance



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to learn more about Yazzie. He was from Ship Rock, NM and earned his Associates in Applied Science from the Univ. of New Mexico in plumbing, electrical, concrete and carpentry. He was also a firefighter, and met his wife through a course on firefighting in California. Eventually, they settled on Pine Ridge Reservation and had three children, Derek (7), Kasey (3) and Kennedy Benally (3 months). His father, a retired police officer, still lives in New Mexico. As Yazzie talked about his entire family, you could tell how proud he was of them and how much he wanted to protect and provide for them. I was soon to see that relationship with two of his children.

As we were driving, Kathy also asked Yazzie about his house. He related with pride that he had a house, and he had a piece of land staked out. Kathy then asked Yazzie what he still needed to get done on his house, and then responded with, "so, let's just get it done while we're here." When we left, the foundation was completed, the inside of the house was cleaned, with walls spackled and painted, and the roof was repaired. Yazzie had taken the van to Rapid City to have his cast removed and brought his children to the house on Thursday to see it. As he walked them into a room, he crouched down beside them and stated, "This is your room. You won't be cold anymore." What a simple statement, but how incredibly moving to witness. On Friday, as we swung by the house before we headed toward the Black Hills, again it brought tears to my eyes and a smile to my face to see Yazzie up on a ladder with his tool belt on working on his own home. It was then that I realized what the Mission of Love did for this family. All Yazzie needed was the house and some helping hands and he now had a home for his family that would be equipped with everything that one would expect in a house in this country.

Delbert Charging Crow was featured in a film that our group of volunteers watched at the Chamber of Commerce, a beautiful structure also built by the Mission of Love and decorated by local artwork including Kevin Poor Bear's. Delbert carves beautiful fine stone fetishes, animal figures out of rock that are incredibly smooth and beautiful. The video highlights the specifics of his work that takes many days. We had a chance to meet him, another gentle spirit, full of love and compassion and I have a stone horse that he made that sits on my nightstand. Delbert engaged a small group of us in a short ceremony in which he blessed us individually and the Mission of Love as a whole. Delbert is a full blooded Oglala Lakota Sioux Indian.

Patricia Catches the Enemy journeyed with us when we went to the Black Hills, Crazy Horse Monument and the Native American Museum. In addition to being a remarkable woman, she is a cancer survivor and is



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very committed to increasing awareness of cancer on the reservation. She has been to several conferences out-of-state, including the Mayo Clinic.

The people and the culture were brought fully to light by Leonard Little Finger who took time to speak to us for two hours in the Sacred Hoop School, a school that was built by the Mission of Love specifically to teach the Lakota language, and through that the culture.

What touched me the most; outside of visiting Wounded Knee, an incredibly sacred and heart-wrenching memorial to incredible atrocities; were the Lakota people. I highlighted a few in this passage, but every one of them has a beautiful and unique story. The Mission of Love has accomplished what is seemingly impossible on this reservation that is in the poorest county in the country. Kathy has spent over a decade building relationships and standing by her word, something that the Lakotas are not used to. From the government to the other groups either on or off the reservation, the Lakotas have been promised many things over recent years and throughout the past century, of which most never occur. As was related to me, when one family saw their house appear on a truck, they were both shocked and joyous as Kathy made true to her promise of getting them a home.

I was both proud and humbled to be a part of the Mission of Love volunteer team on the Pine Ridge Reservation. I arrived in South Dakota with no expectations, but trust in Kathy and what the Mission of Love does, as I had been on two trips with her over ten years ago to Guatemala. I witnessed the number of homes and other structures that have been built, the incredible network of relationships and goodwill that has been created, and the mutual respect that exists between the Lakota people we met and Kathy and the Mission of Love. There is so much more good work to be done! The Lakota people are forever in my heart.

Kristi Walker
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