

REFLECTING ON SPY'S MISSION TRIP TO PINE RIDGE

by Amy Lowe

Michaela Olson's question after landing in Rapid City, "Where's the city?", best characterizes our first impression of South Dakota. As the second largest city in the state, Rapid City has a population about as large as Haverhill, yet it's definitely less urban. As we began our descent into Rapid City, open fields and farmland greeted us, rather than a busy city filled with traffic and buildings, as such a name would imply. The airport itself has one terminal and a very limited flight schedule. We got to know this airport a little too well; a thunderstorm began shortly after our arrival, delaying our ride and stranding us for about ninety minutes. When we finally got moving, the scenery immediately impressed everyone in our cramped passenger van. Ford Fischer and Michaela, our team videographers, immediately got their cameras out, and many other mission trippers snapped photos along the way. The highway, which was a deserted two lane road, cut through an absolutely stunning landscape of plateaus, craggy hills, and valleys. The few visible signs of human life were discouraging; dilapidated trailers and shacks occasionally appeared on the side of the road, and we could already see the work that had to be done. We arrived a bit late to Re-Member, but there was still some buffalo stew left for dinner. Our group immediately began talking to a youth group from Nebraska, who call themselves Countryside Youth or "Coyo" for short. We were all exhausted from traveling and the two hour time change, but we each went to sleep excited for the week ahead.

The following day, Sunday, was devoted to sightseeing and acquainting ourselves with the new region. That morning we visited the Wounded Knee Cemetery, where we learned a bit about the massacre and participated in Communion before touring the cemetery. A mass grave containing victims of the Massacre was located in the center of the cemetery, surrounded by a fence. The rest of the cemetery, overgrown and lonely, was filled with headstones belonging to various members of

the Lakota tribe. They ranged from distinguished WWII veterans to infants, most having their own decorations and unique Lakota name etched on the marker. After touring Wounded Knee, we had lunch at the White River Visitor Center, located just outside of the Badlands National Park. After lunch we took a brief but fascinating hike through some of the "White Wilderness", as the Lakota call the Badlands. The wilderness is utterly still and silent; we got to experience this when Re-Member asked us to separate and spend ten minutes alone. We returned to Re-Member shortly after our hike, and after enjoying a spaghetti dinner, listened to our first speaker of the week.

Re-Member invites Lakota people to give presentations to the volunteers throughout the week. Our first speaker was named Keith Janice. He was a small, fair skinned man with long, wiry hair, and despite his rather Caucasian appearance, he has complete Lakota ancestry and spirit. He spoke about his experiences growing up in that culture and fulfilling the expectations of his elders. He gave details about the process of receiving a Lakota name; they do not earn their name until late adolescence, as they must show their true character and receive a name that suits them. On Tuesday night our other speaker, Will Peters, appealed more to the younger volunteers. As a Lakota high school teacher, he clearly understands the issues facing all young people, not just his Indian students. He also identifies himself as a "recovering macho" and a feminist; he's personally dedicated to defending women's rights and removing all sexism from society. Because Peters is outspoken about such a controversial issue, he has received numerous death threats from Lakota men who find his feminism offensive. He also shared his political views: "I'd vote for Hillary," he said proudly. "Yeah, I'd vote for a woman. Sarah Palin, though, I don't know. If I had a moose problem or something, maybe I'd

cont. on next page

give her a call...." Humorous as his presentation was, it was also filled with sadness; he spoke of how he's buried many of his students, the victims of violence or alcohol. He has hope for a better future, however. That was the message we all received from him. The third speaker of the week, Larry Swalley, was also a homeowner receiving help from Re-Member that week. Like Keith Janice, he spoke mainly about Lakota culture and traditions. One ritual he explained at length involves young Lakota men dancing for three days straight, without sleeping or eating.

Monday began the work week at Re-Member. Our group was divided into three separate work groups, each with two WPC adults and three WPC youth. On the first day, two of our groups helped put skirting on a trailer. Because the South Dakota winter is absolutely brutal, the insulation of these trailers is substandard for the conditions. They are also inefficient; the heat that escapes

through the bottom of the trailer increases the homeowner's consumption of fuel. By adding a skirt, their energy bill is cut at least in half, and the trailer can provide better protection from the subzero temperatures of the winter. This particular trailer was rather isolated; not a single neighbor could be seen from the lot. Our tasks included cutting wood, cutting insulation, drilling nails, constructing wooden frames, and more. We worked in blazing heat with only a break for lunch, although many took refuge in the Re-Member bus when the heat became overwhelming. When it was time to leave, our ride was delayed again; the bus sustained a flat tire, a very common happening for the Re-Member staff. (Ted, the Re-Member Board President, reported a total of nine flat tires by the week's end.) Roland Kim, Bernadette Baird, Geena Denny, Laura Ippolito, and Sammy Sheppard spent their first work day repairing a roof. They braved both

cont. on the next page



heat and wind while working, but found the experience to be very positive. "It was amazing to talk to the lady who owns the house," said Geena. "She was so open about her life." Most notably, Laura overcame a fear: "Yeah, I was afraid of heights," she admitted. "But it wasn't that bad after a few minutes. By the end of the day, I was glad to be up there!"

"...we went to a very remote location and dug a hole for an outhouse."

On Tuesday, all three WPC groups were separated. Rev. Marie Lucca and Lori Swain's group, which included Joanna Fischer, Charlotte Lenes, and Sam Vano finished skirting the trailer and enjoyed speaking to Cornell West, the owner of the trailer, about his military service in Vietnam. My group had a very different work assignment. Rev. Tom McMillan, Jim Olson, Ford, Michaela, and I began our work day at Wounded Knee Cemetery, where we mowed the neglected lawn and used a weed wacker around some of the graves. It was an entirely new experience for all of us. "I feel almost honored to be doing this," said Jim. "Not everyone can say they've mowed the lawn at Wounded Knee." The end result was very successful. All graves previously hidden by grass became plainly visible, and we could even eat lunch under a tree where the grass had previously been up to our knees. After lunch we went to a very remote location and dug a hole for an outhouse. Although we each contributed to this effort, we received help from two other enthusiastic workers. Amadan and Emily Swalley, two Lakota children, helped dig the hole for what would be their family's outhouse. We worked on the site of their future home; their trailer was on the other side of the street, and will be moved sometime in the near future. Both kids had an optimistic, cheerful disposition and thought nothing of the obvious differences between them and us. Bernadette and Roland's group

returned to roofing, finishing the job and having as much fun as they did on the first day.

Wednesday provided a break from working, as it was another tour day. After breakfast Ted took orders for lunch at a restaurant called Bette's Kitchen; choices included an Indian taco, a buffalo burger, pork and rice, or chicken noodle soup; the first two entrees were the most popular. The restaurant is owned by a Lakota woman named Bette, the granddaughter of the famous medicine man Black Elk. She does all her own cooking, so she requests orders in advance. Before lunch we toured Red Cloud Indian School, a very successful and well-funded school for bright Lakota students. It boasts phenomenal graduation and college admissions rates, providing students with a positive learning atmosphere. Located within school grounds is Chief Red Cloud's grave, which we also had the privilege of visiting. After seeing the Red Cloud school, Bette's Kitchen, with its astounding view and outdoor tables, provided us with a unique lunch; most people found the buffalo burger and Indian taco to be favorable, although unfortunately I couldn't say the same for the chicken soup. We finished our tour day by visiting the Oglala Lakota College, where we watched an informational video about the school and visited the college library. Although we wanted to visit the Pine Ridge's own radio station, Kili Radio, it was closed due to high winds that day. Wednesday night at Re-Member was Crafts Night. Several Lakota jewelry makers and artists filled the building, proudly presenting their crafts to the volunteers. Re-Member supports the vendors by providing them with dinner; for some, it's their only meal of the day.

On our last day at Re-member, all three WPC groups worked together. We never left the premises; our assignment was located in the Re-Member workshop, where we spent the day constructing outhouses. Indoor plumbing is a luxury on the Reservation and many families are so poor that they do not

cont. on the next page

even have their own outhouse! Sammy, Charlotte, Michaela, Laura, Sam, and Joanna all helped put together the frames, while Geena, Ford, and I cut the various pieces of the outhouse — the roof, door, walls, and more. The wind was particularly strong that day, and unfortunately it interfered too much; Sam had sawdust blown into her eye, resulting in a very painful splinter and sending her to a nearby hospital. A Coyo girl also got hit in the face by a flying piece of plywood. (Both girls were treated and felt much better by the day's end.) Despite the wind and the injuries, we made five sturdy outhouses.

That night, as on each night before it, we finished the day with a group meeting. Many of our meetings took place outside; one was even held in the Re-Member teepee. The meetings always provided an outlet to express our thoughts and feelings, and an opportunity to ask any questions. Every meeting had a safe, friendly atmosphere. We discussed several important issues, including the poverty we'd witnessed and the adversity faced by the Lakota people. The meetings weren't overly serious, though; there were always graham crackers and Nutella nearby, and at the end of each meeting, Marie would hand each of us a letter of support and encouragement from a member of the WPC congregation. During our last meeting, we celebrated Holy Communion and each said our own goodbye to Pine Ridge. Although we all had a positive experience in South Dakota, we all felt ready to return to our loving families and soft beds.

After a long day of traveling, we felt WPC's welcoming spirit upon arriving home; church members Bev Smith and Dr. Suetta Tenney greeted us at Logan Airport just outside of security on Friday night. This simple yet thoughtful gesture touched all of us and made us even more excited to return to WPC. When we finally arrived at the parking lot, we received a hero's welcome from our friends and family. After such a long and busy week, we really needed this!

Although this particular trip is over, we'll all face many other missions throughout our lives. Whether they're small or large, our week on Pine Ridge has better prepared us for them. We couldn't have done it without the support from Pastors Tom and Marie, our adult chaperones, church community, and each other.

Amy Lowe is a senior at Andover High School and is an active member of SPY.

SOUTH DAKOTA MISSION TRIP SHAREHOLDER LUNCHEON

Sunday, September 26

11:15 am (after worship)

Fellowship Hall

As a way of thanking all of our stock purchasers and the ENTIRE West Parish congregation for their support, the Mission Trip team will sponsor a luncheon including a video presentation, slide show and reflections on our experience.

Those who contributed \$200 or more, will also receive a framed photograph of the natural beauty of the Pine Ridge Reservation.