



Fourth of July was celebrated with a large powwow on the Rosebud Reservation.

TRAVEL

Making a Difference

One Life At a Time

Story and photos by Brenda Lange

Mission trips—undertaken to provide service to others—don't always take participants to third world countries. I've recently returned from my second trip to South Dakota, where I worked among Lakota people on the Rosebud Reservation, and conditions we found there rivaled those of the poorest regions in the world.

My daughter, Liz, and I were part of a large group—114, mostly teens—from the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (SEPA Synod of the ELCA). We traveled to Rapid City on July 1, where we spent three days living in the South Canyon Lutheran Church

and being typical tourists. We visited Mt. Rushmore, Crazy Horse, and other attractions, while we bonded as a group and shared our eagerness to make a difference to the Native Americans of South Dakota.

Then we hit the road in 19 mini vans, with most of us headed for Rosebud, with about 40 of us going on to the Crow Creek Reservation.

Rays of Hope and the Tree of Life

Unemployment on Rosebud stands at about 85 percent and crippling social issues—including drug and alcohol abuse, and



pregnancies and suicides among teens that are well above the national norm—take their toll on the people. An air of hopelessness wafts across the prairie.

Yet this year I felt a slight lifting of that veil; a feeling shared by others who had traveled there previously. A Lakota supermarket sits shiny and new on the edge of town, and other small businesses have sprouted as well, including a little coffee wagon frequented by many of us.

Tree of Life, a Methodist relief organization based in Mission, S.D., was our host, and directed our workdays. We did whatever was asked of us with an enthusiasm that made up for any missing expertise.

Since I was there three years ago, Tree of Life has grown to 17 full-time staff, with an expanded welcome center serving up to 250 hot meals a day and providing clothing and toiletries. In addition to ensuring homes are safe, the agency operates community centers and works with local churches. Its philosophy maintains that each interaction between volunteers and the people of the reservation help create a better future by breaking down racial divides and ending discrimination.

Duties on Rosebud included painting a house, building a wheelchair ramp, working in the Boys' and Girls' Club, and visiting residents of a nearby nursing facility. One day my work crew and I helped prepare the Sun Dance grounds outside St. Francis for the upcoming ceremony.

Others worked in a Day Camp at Two Strike, a tiny, nearby community. The children there wriggled their way into the hearts of our kids who read and played with them and most importantly, showered them with love.

Bonds of affection grew strong in a few short days. When the last day came, hugs and tears were plentiful as the children carried home special bags full of school supplies and toiletries. Our youth were subdued after delivering each child back to his or her house. Liz, who also worked with these kids three years ago, sums up the feelings of the Pennsylvania kids this way:

"We're proud of our work, and know we've made the kids happy, but then we leave them and go back to our own lives

Above Left: SEPA volunteers worked and played with the Lakota: Daycamp staff played especially hard. **Above Right:** Mt. Rushmore is one of the top attractions in South Dakota's Black Hills.

imagining what they're going home to. We can only hope that we've made as much of an impact on them as they have made on us."

Lessons Learned

We learned something of the history of the Lakota through the stories and flute of Daniel Stevens, who works with elementary school children. We learned something of their culture through the crafts and hand games taught us by Steve Tamayo, a Lakota educator.

We also learned a lot about ourselves and what it takes to really be of service to others.

Sleeping on a church floor, preparing meals for nearly a hundred hungry teens, and coping with the myriad emotional, mental and physical challenges over the course of nearly two weeks opened our eyes to just what we could do when we set our minds to it.

But what struck us all is the fact that we got to return to our homes here and our lives of relative comfort and stability, leaving the Lakota behind to continue their struggles.

The depth of their concerns are beyond what we were able to fully address or comprehend in one week's time, but as our leader, Molly Beck Dean, reminded us, "We make a difference one life at a time."

"This year's theme was *God's work, our hands*," she added. "Our faith calls us to serve others, but with this trip I know we will always be blessed as much as we are a blessing."

For more information on Tree of Life and how you can help, call (605) 856-4266 or visit www.treeoffliferelief.org. Tree of Life Ministry is located at 140 S. Roosevelt St., P.O. Box 149, Mission, SD 57555-0149. **BL**

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