

Teaching on an Indian Reservation

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“Dad, this was the best family vacation ever.” When a father hears those words from his 15-year-old daughter, one would think it would be after a camping trip in the Rockies or a stay near the beach in Florida, both of which we have done, but those words came from my daughter after we spent nearly a week helping teach summer classes at a school in the poorest county in America.

In July 2008, my family and I packed up and headed to South Dakota to the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. While there, we helped a family friend Katie Parker (2006 U.S.I. Education graduate) teach a few classes in the summer school Gear Up program. Parker is in her third year teaching at Loneman School on the “Rez.”

The Rez is home to the Oglala tribe of the Sioux, or Lakota. The reservation is beautiful in so many ways, with rolling prairie and part of the Badlands within its boundaries. But also located on the Rez is unbelievable poverty, the type of poverty that one wouldn't expect to see in America. Very few homes have gas and electricity. Many don't have running water. During the winter months, many families have only heat from wood burning stoves. That's all there is to keep those families warm in their substandard homes while trying to survive the often brutal South Dakota winters.



The poverty of the reservation carries over to Loneman School, a contract school. There are four types of schools on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation; those run by the state, by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Catholic schools and contract schools. Contract schools operate independently and receive funds mainly through grants.

About 15 middle school students were taking part in the Gear Up classes. We taught in the last week of the three week program. As is often the case in poverty stricken areas, the students were behind grade level academically, especially in reading. That didn't keep us from being excited about what we would teach, and after some early hesitation from the students, they too became excited about what we taught.

My wife and 15-year-old daughter taught Anatomy and Physiology. They made the class as hands-on as possible to keep the kids' attention. It appeared as if everyone was having fun as all the students had their bodies' outline drawn on large sheets of paper, and then colored and glued on their digestive system followed by their respiratory system. The middle schoolers laughed at the cups of Jello they were given to dramatize what we would look like without bones. They enjoyed eating the Jello as they learned about their skeletal system.





In the afternoon, my 13-year-old son and I taught a class on robotics. We took our two Lego NXT robots for the students to use and program. They all were quite competitive to see who could make their robot get around a track first, complete with obstacles.

My daughter also taught a class in musical keyboarding. None of the kids in the class had ever had a chance to play on a keyboard or a piano. It took no time at all before they could play some simple songs. Their eyes lit up when we told them that the keyboards, which had

been donated, would be staying with the school. The keyboards will be added to their gifted and talented program.

We were fortunate to be able to meet some of the families of the Rez. I was able to spend time with the Charles and Emma Janis family. In their small home, no larger than many people's two-car garage, they and their 14 children live. I felt honored to be able to ask about their life's journey living in such harsh conditions. Both Charles and Emma credited their faith in Jesus that has allowed their family to be different from many other homes on the reservation in that both of them are parents to all 14 of the children. A high divorce rate on the reservation leads to large blended families.

I could feel the love in that family. Charles was so proud of his sons and daughters and their athletic ability. Some of them had been on traveling basketball teams where they won championships. Some are currently being looked at by college recruiters. Emma showed off her quilting skills as she was working on several star quilts. These quilts are a part of the Lakota tradition, and are often given as gifts to honor people. She also sells them to help support her large family. My family felt honored when we were invited by Emma to join them for a traditional dinner of Indian tacos. These are much like tacos we are used to, but instead of corn shells the meat was put on fry bread, a bread dough that is deep fat fried.



Another day trip took me to the home of Jack Pittman. Jack is half Alaskan Indian, half Lakota. His wife is full blood Lakota and they live on her family's ancestral land. Their home is 7 miles on the paved highway from the town of Pine Ridge, and then another two miles down a dirt road, that becomes nearly impassable during and following rain.

As I drove up to their home, I was struck by the unbelievable beauty of this house out in the middle of the prairie, but amazed by the obvious poverty as I got nearer the home. Inside the home I saw a lack of comforts that we take for granted. The Pittmans have only electricity, but not enough power going into their home for a stove. That means their only way of cooking is in the microwave or on a single hotplate. This family has only an outhouse, and Jack was so proud that he helped build the two-seater just a short time before I visited

The house has no true running water. What they do have is a hose running from a nearby relative's home. That meant they didn't have to hike over a half mile to a stream to get their water. Sitting in their small square home, (which has very little furniture and the interior walls has wood on only one side, so you can see the studs in the other room). I was taken aback by something Jack said. "We heat our home using wood in an old coal burning stove that dates back to the 1920s, and we have a hose for water and we have electricity. But we're one of the better off homes on the reservation. Many don't have that." The Pittman house was the same as many homes that I've seen in some of the poorest homes in Juarez, Mexico, yet he was thankful to have it better than many others on the Rez.

As an instructor of Radio/TV, I wanted to take cameras and capture video of the experience. It has turned out that this video will serve many purposes. A news package I produced was aired by Fox 7, an Evansville TV station. That package featured the work and teaching job of Katie Parker. At least two nonprofit organizations have requested promotional videos be done using the video and interviews gathered while in South Dakota. These will be used to help them continue their work on the Rez, which includes getting firewood to the reservation. They also help many Lakotas update their homes by weatherproofing them, and even helping some to get running water

There are many memories from the trip that will stay with me, including always having to be on the lookout for rattlesnakes. When at the Pittman home, Jack showed us where his daughter nearly was bitten by a rattler when she went out the front door. Had she been bitten, she would have been in big trouble as his family has no car and getting her to the hospital would have been tough.

I will also always remember the incredible pride in many of the people, but also some of the hopelessness. In the short week we were there, two young people committed suicide and a brother of one of Parker's students was murdered. The suicide rate on the reservation is out of control. That goes along with the unemployment and alcoholism rates of over 80 percent. Living in these conditions would make most people hopeless.

But at the same time, there were many stories about the pride these people had in their ancestors and their families. To see Charles Janis saying how he is expecting each of his fourteen children to go to college so they can make something of themselves was to hear a father wanting more for his children than he ever had. College was never an option for Charles.

I'll always be thankful for our opportunity to be a part of the reservation for the week we were there. Already, my children are asking if we can go back next summer, and I hope that we are able to do so. As a college instructor, I know the importance of a good education. I hope that through the short classes we taught, some of these students stay motivated to set their sights high and get to college. That would make our trip even more worthwhile.

"Dad, this was the best family vacation every." Indeed it was and we hope to go again next year.

Author's note: The Loneman School does not have enough books to meet their needs. If you have any books that you would be willing to donate to the school, especially books that would be of interest to elementary and middle school boys, contact me and I'll tell you how you can help. If your interest lies in buying an authentic star quilt hand stitched by Emma Janis, I can also assist you.