

Member Spotlight:

St. Joseph's Indian School and Red Cloud Indian School



The New Buffalo

and the Next Generation of Warriors

A long time ago, on the Great Plains, in what is now called South Dakota, the buffalo provided the Lakota Sioux Nation with everything they needed to survive. By using all the pieces of the buffalo, they had more than just food to eat – they were able to create tools to use for cooking and hunting, needles and thread to sew, materials to make rope, clothing, and shoes, the hide provided shelter, and was used to build sleds and much more.

Education replaces the buffalo as a way to survive and thrive in this modern era.

Photograph courtesy of Emily Swanson.

Today, there is a new buffalo for the Lakota people, as Keith Moore, director of the Bureau of Indian Education stated, “Within our culture, our new buffalo is education.” Education replaces the buffalo as a way to survive and thrive in this modern era. It offers not only the opportunity to provide food, clothing, shelter, and basic necessities for family; it also offers a way to support, help, and change a community.

In South Dakota, St. Joseph's Indian School and Red Cloud Indian School, share a common goal – to provide a quality education to Lakota students, instill in them a sense of pride in their Oglala Lakota heritage, and give them the confidence to be successful in whatever they do. While these two schools have the same goal, they both approach that goal in different ways.

St. Joseph's Indian School

In 1927, Father Henry Hogeback of the Priests of the Sacred Heart, opened St. Joseph's Indian School, a boarding school for children in grades 1-8, located off-reservation in Chamberlin, South Dakota. Boarding schools were popular during the late 1800's and early 1900's as many communities were small and scattered, and roads were treacherous and even deadly. In addition, the 1920's and 30's in South Dakota saw severe dust storms, an invasion of grasshoppers, and the Great Depression. Taking all of this into account, many of the students who attended St. Joseph's Indian School did so out of necessity for survival.

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Red Cloud Indian School

In the 1880's, U.S. policy dictated that each Indian reservation be assigned a religion, and the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, home to the Oglala Sioux Tribe, had been assigned Episcopalian. Realizing education would play an important role in his people's future, Chief Red Cloud, one of the great leaders of the Oglala Sioux, requested that the Jesuits set up a school on the Pine Ridge Reservation. The problem? The Society of Jesus (Jesuits) was a Catholic Order and the reservation's assigned religion was Episcopalian. This, however, did not stop Red Cloud from petitioning the government to allow the Jesuits to set up a school. In 1888, on the Pine Ridge Reservation, Chief Red Cloud's hard work paid off when the Jesuits founded Holy Rosary Mission, and by the end of that year, nearly 100 students were attending classes at the school.

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Today, St. Joe's has evolved from 53 students in a dormitory setting to almost 200 students living in family-style homes with house parents, including nearly 40 high school students who live on campus but attend the local public high school.

Students are accepted to St. Joe's based on need, and the desire of their parent or guardian for them to attend the school. While the students must be Native American, religion does not factor into the decision. "Only 55 percent of our kids are Catholic," says Father Stephen Huffstetter, SCJ, director and president of St. Joseph's Indian School, "because we take kids based on need rather than religion." Geography is also not a factor in gaining admission to the school, as many students come from cities and reservations throughout the state of South Dakota.

Body, Heart, Spirit and Mind

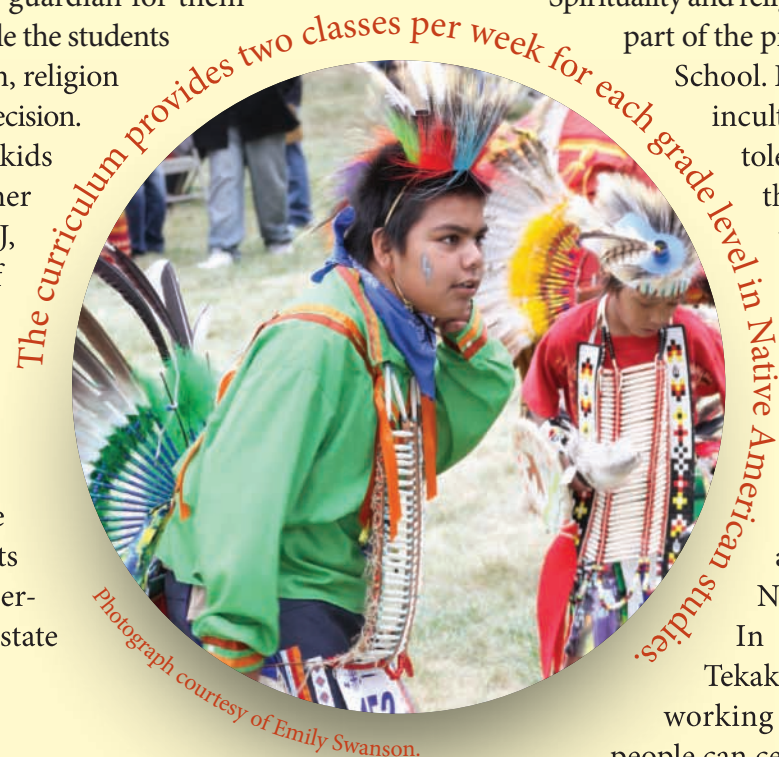
"I think when we look at what we're trying to do here," explains Huffstetter, "I like to use the word holistic. We try to use the integrated approach. We're looking after the body, heart, spirit, and mind of our students." With the help of on-site family service counselors, a clinical director, a residential director, in addition to house parents and teaching staff, St. Joseph's Indian School is able to concentrate on the four areas of body, heart, spirit, and mind, to help its students become fully rounded people.

The school provides health and dental care, and looks after the nutritional needs of the students. Family service counselors provide outreach services to the

children's families and help students work through emotional issues. As Huffstetter explains, "Our kids can come from tough emotional backgrounds with drinking and drug use in the home, single parent or absent parent homes, and transient living situations. So we work on those issues of the heart."

Spirituality and religious values are an important part of the program at St. Joseph's Indian School. Pope John Paul II wrote that inculturation should not just be tolerated but encouraged so that each group can embrace the gospel in their own way. The Diocese of Rapid City has been pro-active by creating the Lakota Inculturation Task Force, which addresses the relationship between the Catholic church's teachings and rites and those of the Native American culture. In addition, the National Tekakwitha Conference is also working towards finding ways people can celebrate the liturgy and have a spirituality that incorporates both the Catholic religion and Native American spirituality. Sunday mass at St. Joe's is very close to the regular Catholic mass, with a few differences. "We try to take elements that we think will help highlight the Christian message or the gospel message," relates Huffstetter, "and make it clearer by what we incorporate." For instance, the use of a drum song that's in Lakota is used as a prayer song, or for reflection time, the traditional Lakota smudging (a ritual cleansing with the smoke from sage) is performed during the Penitential Rite, and Huffstetter uses stories and images that the students can relate to and understand on a cultural level.

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The curriculum provides two classes per week for each grade level in Native American studies. Photograph courtesy of Emily Swanson.

In 1969, the school changed its name from Holy Rosary Mission School to Red Cloud Indian School. The name change not only honors the man who worked to bring the school to Pine Ridge, but illustrates the partnership between the Lakota people and the Jesuits in the education of the young people of Pine Ridge. Today, Red Cloud Indian School is one of the largest, private Native American schools within the county and is comprised of two elementary schools, one high school, and the Heritage Center Museum. "We are keeping Red Cloud's dream alive by continuing to work in that partnership with the Jesuits," relates Tina Merdanian, director of Institutional Relations and a graduate of Red Cloud Indian School, "and giving our kids skills they need so they are successful in mainstream society in hope they return to the Pine Ridge to make this a better place."

Formula for Success

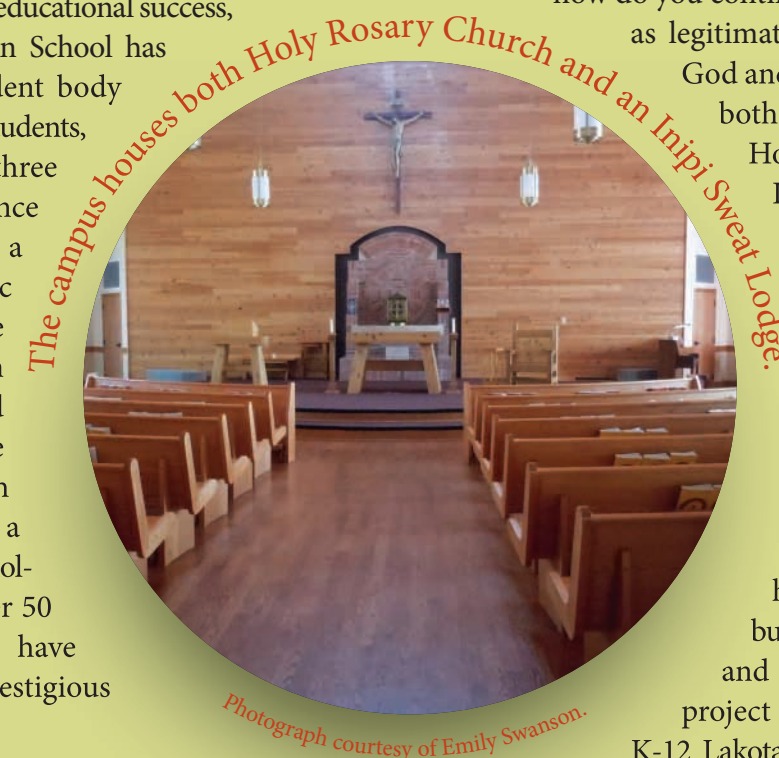
If there is a formula for educational success, then Red Cloud Indian School has found it. With a student body of approximately 600 students, spread among the three schools, their attendance rate tops 90 percent, a far cry from the public schools on the Pine Ridge Reservation. In addition, Red Cloud High School led the nation last year with nine students receiving a Gates Millennium Scholarship. Since 1999, over 50 Red Cloud students have been awarded this prestigious scholarship.

Father George Winzenburg, SJ, president of Red Cloud Indian School, believes one of the keys to the success Red Cloud experiences is the holistic approach

the school takes to education. "The native people speak of it as body, mind, and spirit," explains Winzenburg, "and in the Jesuit way we speak about it as the whole person. You don't just target a youngster's mind, but you challenge the youngster's heart and soul."

Bob Brave Heart, a graduate and the current superintendent for Red Cloud Indian School agrees, "We believe in the whole education. We believe in academic excellence. We believe in Lakota studies so our students will feel empowered with a sense of identity of who they are, where they come from, and how they can succeed. And we believe in spiritual formation." Students are required to take theology classes, which are paralleled with spiritual formation classes. "What we focus on is the understanding of both traditions, Catholicism and Lakota spirituality," explains Brandon Vaca, spiritual formation teacher at Red Cloud High School, "and we're constantly asking students how do you apply it to your life and

how do you continue to live it out? We see both as legitimate and faithful approaches to God and we try to learn the best from both." The campus houses both Holy Rosary Church and an Inipi Sweat Lodge for use by both the administration and students.



The campus houses both Holy Rosary Church and an Inipi Sweat Lodge. Photograph courtesy of Emily Swanson.

An important and vital part of the school's academic curriculum is the Lakota Studies program where in addition to spirituality, classes focus on Lakota language, history, and government. "We've built a Lakota studies department and initiated a Lakota language project to develop a comprehensive K-12 Lakota language curriculum," reveals Brave Heart, "There is nothing in existence of that nature anywhere, so it will be historic when accomplished." While the Lakota language project is

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Lakota culture is an important part of the curriculum at St. Joe's, from classroom learning, to cultural activities like the Annual Powwow, to the on-campus Akta Lakota Museum and Cultural Center, students are surrounded by their culture. The curriculum provides two classes per week for each grade level in Native American studies. Classroom lessons include history, language, government, as well as culture and rituals. "I think it helps our kids be more proud as a people, and as a person, helps them to know who they are when they feel like their culture can be in all areas of their life," explains LaRayne Woster, the Native American studies teacher at St. Joseph's Indian School. "I want the students to be able to carry on a conversation about their culture. I want them to know something about tribal government, Powwow, Sun Dance, the language, and the tribes."

The Residential Model

It's hard to overlook the challenges many Native American families are facing, such as poverty, unemployment, drug and alcohol abuse, gambling addiction, violence, depression, and a high suicide rate. "I think there's a real need for kids to be away from some of the influences they're facing, or their family situation is such that they're really better off being out of the home for a certain amount of time," relates Huffstetter. "It would be wonderful if there wasn't a need for a residential school, but I think we can help these kids because of our comprehensive programming. I think the advantage of having a residential school is we can look at the overall environment from many angles."

Each home can house up to 12 students and is age and gender appropriate.



Photograph courtesy of Emily Swanson.

Students at St. Joe's live in one of 18 homes, each with house parents who provide guidance, encouragement, and a home environment for the students. "We are partnering with their biological parents to provide the best care, welfare, safety, and security we possibly can for their child," explains Mike Fischer, house parent for the freshman and sophomore boys home. "They've entrusted their most prized gift into our hands, and we take that very, very seriously."

Each home can house up to 12 students and is age and gender appropriate. The homes mirror a traditional home including house duties, homework checks, curfews, and for the older students the possibility of borrowing the car. "We want them to experience the real world, real life experiences," explains Fisher. "Having a car and taking care of it, having a job and responsibilities are all part of the real world."

On weekends, house parents plan activities for the entire house, the older students are treated to weekend field trips to concerts, skiing, and snowboarding, while the younger students may go swimming or to the park for a picnic. It's these shared experiences in a nurturing atmosphere, which give students that family experience. Erin, a graduate of St. Joseph's Indian School and a senior at Chamberlain High School, describes it as, "knowing I'll always have a place to come back to even when I go to college. They're like a parent, even though it's a school, it's a big support system of a lot of people who really care about you and really put a lot of effort into what they do." Chris, a sophomore at Chamberlain High School and a St. Joseph's Indian School graduate, agrees, "I have a place to go and there are people here who care about me and help me make good decisions."

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halfway to completion, Red Cloud students are being taught to speak and write the language every day. Students are also learning Lakota history and culture, as well as the traditional values of respect, humility, generosity, wisdom and bravery, and how to apply these values to their daily lives. "The students learn about traditional warrior societies. The Lakota, or Sioux, are known as warriors," explains Roger White Eyes, Lakota studies teacher and graduate of Red Cloud High School, "and through our values, our beliefs, and our hard work, our ancestors were able to survive and be successful. Our values and our beliefs haven't changed and today, you still have to survive, you still have to provide for your family, but it's a different world, and today you do it through education. That's how you become a successful warrior."

The teaching staff at Red Cloud Indian School are an integral part of the school's success by creating a supportive and encouraging environment for students. "Our teachers create an atmosphere," relates Winzenburg, "both directly and indirectly that tells students, 'you're going to college' and they continue to encourage them in that respect."

Along with a college counseling office, students have access to mentors from universities, such as Creighton University, who help coach students and encourage them to continue their education, and high school seniors take a class which assists them in the application process for college and scholarships. According to

White Eyes, "We have staff here that really care, I mean genuinely care about the future of these students. And I think we have such a diverse staff that the students learn something from each one of the staff members. Each staff member here brings something to the table in the education of each student." Merdanian agrees, "My children represent 3rd and 4th generations on each side of the family to attend this school. And so you see the sense of pride, you see the sense of history, but more importantly you see the sense of community; we are a community here on campus. Returning back to Red Cloud was coming back to my second family."

White Eyes, Merdanian, and Brave Heart all know firsthand the benefit a Red Cloud education provides; all went on to college and returned to the Pine Ridge Reservation and Red Cloud Indian School to make a difference, and according to current students,

they are doing just that. "Red Cloud means family," states Brenna, a senior at Red Cloud High School, "it's been my home away from home. I'm here from 7:30 a.m. in the morning until sometimes 6:00 p.m. at night. When I look back on Red Cloud I'll always remember how many good friends I made here. They're like my family." "I'll have to agree on that one," responds Ernest, also a senior at Red Cloud High School, "we're even friends with the teachers. That means a lot to me, the closeness. And of course, Red Cloud helped point me in the right direction."

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The teaching staff create a supportive and encouraging environment for students.



Photograph courtesy of Emily Swanson.

Challenges

One of the challenges to a residential school setting is family involvement. Huffstetter explains, "You really want the families to be strong and we try to find ways to get involved with families more on campus." American Indian Day and Powwow is an annual event that not only showcases the talents of the students, but welcomes their families to campus for the weekend. The Sacred Hoop Tiyošpaye Center, on St. Joseph's Indian School campus, provides short-term accommodations for the visiting families of students. The family services counselors also keep in contact with the families, making sure they are kept up-to-date on their child's progress.

The students themselves face challenges, as Brock Sundall, 5th grade teacher at St. Joseph's Indian School, explains, "Because our kids live here and not with their families, they often get homesick and that's a definite challenge our kids go through especially the younger ages. Also, many of our kids bring in excess baggage from home we need to deal with to try to get them going on their educational path." Despite the challenges, the goal at St. Joe's is a relatively simple one. "My primary goal is to get them to understand the content that will make them successful and move onto the next grade," continues Sundall, "but also to teach them skills that they'll be able to use in every day life like listening skills, some personal skills like manners and being able to talk to people, social skills, and everyday skills that you use regardless of where you go."



Into the Future

"Our goal," explains Huffstetter, "is to have the kids stay in school, and graduate, and have a plan for the future." And that future is made possible by teachers like Woster, "I want our kids to have role models that will support them in a way they can succeed. I want to be a role model to my students. I know they're looking at me so I make sure to try and say the right things and do the right things. It keeps me on my path. I want them to know when they grow up they can have a good job, they can go to college."

While the students at St. Joseph's Indian School may graduate and move on to college, they are never out of sight or mind of the teachers and administrators at the school. "We try to follow up with our alumni director and counselors," says Huffstetter, "and house parents will keep track of students and see how they're doing. We even try to help provide some scholarships for higher education." The scholarship fund Huffstetter refers to was established by the Congregation of the Priests of the Sacred Heart to help the graduates of St. Joseph's Indian School.

"Now that I'm getting close to graduation," says Erin, "I have it in my head to be successful and to always push myself. St. Joe's, the staff members, and the donors have provided everything for us here. It's really given me the opportunities I need to be successful."

According to a recent study conducted by the Civil Rights Project at UCLA's Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, less than 50 percent of Native American students nationwide will graduate high school. However, two schools in South Dakota are not only working hard to change that statistic, but have already accomplished that goal for

Challenges

While all of these components together spell success for Red Cloud, there are still a few challenges for the school and the students.

Red Cloud Indian School is 100 percent tuition free; however, there is a required administration fee of \$100 per student, which is capped at \$200 per family. Still, the average annual income per family on the Pine Ridge Reservation is \$6,000, with an unemployment rate of over 80 percent, so the school works with the families both with in-kind services and scholarships. It takes 12 million dollars a year to keep the doors of Red Cloud open with 90 percent of the operating budget coming from contributions.

The biggest challenges for the students of Red Cloud Indian School are the conditions, as well as the stigma attached, to living on the reservation. "The everyday struggles the students go through growing up on a reservation, the suicide rate, high school dropouts, drugs, alcohol, teen pregnancies," describes White Eyes, "all that stuff they have to deal with, they overcome, and come here every day, get an education, and try themselves, to succeed." Those challenges also include overcoming the prejudice associated with living on a reservation. "People's perception about the reservation is like, 'it's the res' like it's a bad place to be," relates Brenna, "they don't really give it a chance. So we're trying



double hard to make it. Red Cloud is a great place, sure it's on the res, but this is a great place to become educated and to learn."

The Future

The Jesuit philosophy of men and women for others is a message the school works hard to promote and it appears the message is being well received. Many former Red Cloud Indian School graduates have returned to Pine Ridge and the school to make a difference.

A graduate of Red Cloud Indian School, Brave Heart came back to give back, "Red Cloud has been my life for the last 25 years, it's my life's work, my service to my people, and to God. To make a difference in the lives of my people is what gives me satisfaction, it's the purpose of my life." White Eyes also came back to make a difference, "I was away for 20 years but I came back. When you see things you don't like here, hopefully you've gained the knowledge to make those changes. All of our students have the opportunity to do that, that's what we provide here at Red Cloud." And that's exactly what

Ernest plans to do after graduation, "My plans after high school are of course college, no doubt about it. I see myself in business management. I want to own my own business, maybe a restaurant, and the reservation would be the perfect place. By coming home to make a difference, I can make one small change and help my family out."

their students. St. Joseph's Indian School and Red Cloud Indian School are not content to simply teach students the basics; they educate the child's whole mind, body, and spirit. They provide them with the knowledge, wisdom, and sense of pride in who they are and where they come from, and encourage their students to return and give back to their communities. This is their recipe for success. ☀