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Voices on Campus

Tina Merdanian and the Red Cloud Indian School

In February and March 2012, Bridgewater State hosted a visit from Valentina (Tina) Merdanian and a delegation from the Red Cloud Indian School on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. The visit reciprocated an earlier trip made by President Mohler-Faria and a group from our university to tour the reservation and begin to understand the depths of the challenges that face the Native Americans who live on Pine Ridge. The challenges are many. The unemployment rate on the reservation is higher than 80% and the average annual income among its residents is about \$6,200. Pine Ridge, like many Indian reservations in the United States is, to borrow Ms. Merdanian's phrase, an "island of poverty within a nation of progress." Moreover, its residents carry a

heavy historical burden. Pine Ridge is home to Wounded Knee, the site where an 1890 massacre of at least 150 Lakota by U.S. Cavalry marked the end of the country's Indian Wars, as well as a famous 1972 American Indian Movement occupation that called to public attention the failure of U.S. governments to honor its treaties with Native peoples. To many, Pine Ridge is a symbol of American governmental perfidy. But today, as Ms. Merdanian and her colleagues Father George Winzenburg, Tashina Banks, Robert Brave Heart and Colleen McCarthy explained, it can also be a symbol of hope.

One of the brightest prospects for hope on Pine Ridge is undoubtedly the Red Cloud Indian School. Founded

in 1888 as Drexel Mission by a Jesuit missionary (by 1898, it became Holy Rosary Mission), the school began with 100 students and bore the mentality and



Photographs by Rob Matheson, Bridgewater State University

the main aim of Indian schools of that era: assimilation. Almost 125 years later, Red Cloud Indian School is one of the largest private Native American schools in the United States, encompassing two elementary schools, a high school and a heritage center. The 600 students at Red Cloud are educated virtually tuition-free and more than 90% of its operating funds come from private contributions. Today, Red Cloud's school curriculum reflects a double target: to prepare students for success beyond the classroom and the reservation and to enrich their lives with a full understanding of their Lakota heritage. In addition to modern school curriculum, Red Cloud students are educated in both the Catholic tradition and in Lakota spirituality and language. In partnership with Indiana University, Red Cloud School has implemented the Lakota Language Project, making two years of instruction in Lakota mandatory for all of its students. Language is central to Lakota culture and spirituality. "That's *what* it is," noted Brave Heart.

On March 1, Red Cloud Indian School's Director of Institutional Relations, Tina Merdanian addressed a sizeable audience in Bridgewater State University's Horace Mann Auditorium as part of the President's Distinguished Speaker Series. Her wide-ranging talk explained Lakota origins and world view, and detailed the inspiring work and prospects of the Red Cloud Indian School. In the following excerpt, Ms. Merdanian recounts the watershed event of Wounded Knee and the meaning that she and others among the Lakota continue to draw from it and its legacy.

Wounded Knee was a repercussion of Greasy Grass, or Little Big Horn as you understand it within U.S. history. Big Foot and his band were coming down from the



North to meet with Red Cloud on the Pine Ridge Agency, regarding what was happening within the tribes, because at that time the Ghost Dances were going on. The Government viewed these gatherings as uprisings. The reality is that these Ghost Dances were asking in our prayers for our old way of life back, asking God, “why have you forsaken us?” And what we were asking was to really find that harmony in who we were then as a people, trying to understand all of the transitions that were going on. Because it was like a foreign government had come in, telling us who we are, what rules we have to abide by, what we could do, when we could do it. And not being able to practice the true fabric of who we were.

Big Foot was travelling in December and, you have to understand, in South Dakota, December is very cold. We have the wind that is constantly blowing and sometimes six-foot snow drifts, wind chills of 30 to 40 below zero. And he’s coming down with primarily women and children – about

300 of them. And they were met by the U.S. Cavalry. And they were stopped at an area called Wounded Knee Creek. And they were surrounded on three sides by the Cavalry, which was up on the ridge. The people were down in the valley. They had set up camp.

The Cavalry was instructed to disarm our people of any weapons. For the most part, our people didn’t have any weapons. And with that, according to U.S. history, there was an older gentleman who was deaf, and he had a small weapon. One of the U.S. Cavalry approached him and tried to take away his weapon. The people were trying to explain to the cavalryman that the old man was deaf and couldn’t understand what he was saying.

A shot rang out. The U.S. military had the Gatling guns and they opened fire on these men, women and children.

This is a very difficult part of our history.

When it was all over, there were some women and children who had made it to a gully and they were hiding out. The

Cavalry called out one more time. “Come out, we will not harm you.” Some of them did, and they were mowed down. Given the time of year, what the United States Cavalry did was dig a mass grave. And the bodies that lay frozen in the snow were collected and thrown in this mass grave.

Today, there’s a very simple, humble monument that stands close to the location of where this massacre happened. Our students drive by this monument every day on their way to and from school. They don’t see just a monument to a mass grave, they see their relatives, their ancestors, and what they gave so that we could be here today.

I typically don’t share this very often, but just to give you a sense of that history, I will. My father’s grandfather was a survivor of Wounded Knee. You have to understand the type of mentality back then. It was not often talked about because of the fear of repercussions.

He was a very young boy. He was wounded. He made it to the stronghold, into the Badlands. There, he was adopted by an older man, raised, grew up, had children, grandchildren. What he taught his children and his grandchildren was forgiveness.

When my father told me this story, I was puzzled. I mustered enough courage to ask my Dad, “why forgiveness?” He looked at me, and he said: “If we can forgive, then we can educate. If we can educate, we can assure that history does not repeat itself again.”

So now you understand what that really means to our people, today.