

Emerging Leaders explore Lakota history, culture

Aug. 1, 2019

Three alums of Rapid City Collective Impact's Emerging Leaders Fellowship Program presented on Lakota history and culture during the first quarterly meeting of current program participants at The Journey Museum on July 18.

Tamera Miyasato, Sarah Pierce and Amy Sazue were members of Cadre 2 and first tag-teamed on a similar presentation for their own Emerging Leaders class last year.

Their presentation, "Re-imagining Perception: Lakota History, Culture & Intercultural Relations in Rapid City," covered topics ranging from Lakota spirituality and family structure, to the long-term effects of boarding schools and common ways minorities are still marginalized today.

Miyasato opened with a short story called "The Baroness." Although fictional, it is intended to elicit questions and comments about who is to blame for the baroness's ultimate demise. After small groups explained their reasoning for who they believed was responsible, Miyasato asked if opinions would change if listeners thought of the characters as representing larger groups of people, systems or institutions, rather than individuals.

Miyasato went on to explain the concept of "Mitakuye oyasin," which means "We are all related," and the circular nature of relationships in Lakota families and tribes.



Sazue shared a version of the Lakota creation story and explained why the buffalo is considered sacred to the Lakota people. She also described the seven sacred ceremonies associated with Lakota spirituality and discussed the significance of the medicine wheel.

Pierce provided a history of the people of the Oceti Sakowin – the Lakota, Dakota and Nakota tribes of the Northern Plains – and the dramatic changes that occurred in the late 19th century due to the policies and actions of the U.S. Government and incoming white settlers. Pierce said these actions,

including the removal of Native children from their families to boarding schools where their hair was cut and their language forbidden, the mass killing of the buffalo – which not only held spiritual significance, but also served as the main source of food and shelter for the Lakota people – and the 1890 massacre at Wounded Knee, ultimately “killed the warrior spirit.”

“The Lakota history and culture presentation was profound and powerful,” Emerging Leader Anna Quinn of Meals on Wheels of Western South Dakota said. “To hear just some of the many atrocities that the Lakota people endured was heart-wrenching, but to hear about the amazing things that are being done to raise awareness and revive the Lakota culture brings hope.”



While the subject matter was serious and somber at times, there were lighter moments during the presentation as well. For example, Sazue said she was at a picnic where she made a plate for an older woman in attendance – an act of respect toward elders in the Lakota culture – but was met with a less-than-grateful response from someone who clearly did not want to be thought of as “too old” to get her own plate.

The presenters welcomed questions from the Emerging Leaders and also challenged them to take what they learned and use it to help break down some of the barriers that still exist between cultures in Rapid City today.

“Inequity in our community is always a difficult conversation to have,” Emerging Leader Colleen Bshara of the Rapid City Area Schools said. “Sarah, Tamera, and Amy bravely guided us through this topic and sparked discussions that may never have happened without their leadership. We left feeling unified in our goal to make our community more accepting and appreciative of its diversity.”



“We all have the opportunity and responsibility to become true allies and to work to eliminate discrimination and racism as it relates to any marginalized group,” Quinn said.

“The presentation on Lakota culture and history was the most powerful presentation on this topic I have ever attended,” Emerging Leader Fawn Hall of Western Dakota Tech said. “The biggest takeaway for me was to actually listen to, consider and implement ideas from cultural experts.”

“Having individuals from various cultural backgrounds represented in an organization, or on a board, is nothing more than checking a box that asks if you’re culturally diverse,” Hall added, “Yet, even then, truly being culturally diverse would only be accurate if you are trusting those individuals who enable you to check the box, and giving them a real voice, not just simply a seat at the table.”

Sazue, who is also a member of RCCI's Guiding Council and OneHeart's Native Leadership Circle, said the information the group presents is difficult to discuss, but if it is never addressed, then there is no awareness. She often stresses the importance of creating bridges of communication, building relationships and coming to a deeper understanding of each other.

"If you know better, you do better," Sazue said.

(Jessica Gromer of the John T. Vucurevich Foundation serves as the facilitator for the Emerging Leaders Fellowship Program. RCCI extends its thanks to Jessica and JTVF for their leadership and continued support of the program.)