

The Wolakota Waldorf School

By Chris Young

In the early 1990's, a group of Lakota (Sioux) people met to find a better way to educate the Lakota children. In Waldorf they found an approach that ran parallel to Lakota spiritual beliefs. They wanted a school and a community where people would live and work and that would retain the Lakota values of respect, generosity, wisdom and courage. The Wolakota Waldorf Society was started in 1993. The society raised funds and purchased 80 acres in the middle of the Pine Ridge Reservation, South Dakota. A building was put up and the kindergarten was started in 1994.

Like any initiative, we have had our ups and downs. Last year, there were only six children in the school, three in kindergarten, three in second grade. This year we have seven children in third grade, 13 children in kindergarten and a waiting list of seven. We have begun this year with many changes. Over the summer, many trees were planted around the school, some ground has been leveled to make a playground, and the buildings have been painted. We hope to start a teacher-training program on the reservation. Renewed enthusiasm means we will need more teachers soon.

The Pine Ridge Reservation is one of the poorest counties in the United States. It is in many ways like being in a third world country. Not only is the culture different, but also people have huge difficulties to overcome in every realm. There is 85percent unemployment, 85percent alcoholism, and drugs have entered the reservation. This creates the secondary difficulties of fetal alcohol syndrome, and mental, physical, and sexual abuse. On the other side, the Lakota people themselves are in many ways very resilient. They are trying to bring back their language, spiritual philosophy and culture. They still live in their traditional extended family, and their connection with the land is strong. The school is run totally on funding from outside the reservation. The school is tuition-free to allow all children to attend. Up until now, most of the money has come from Europe, but now we are enlarging our resources. Last year, the school managed to run on \$32,000. This year to pay everyone a living wage and run the school adequately, we need to raise \$100,000. The teachers live in the school building. They each have one small room. They clean and maintain the buildings and do many assorted tasks. We have enough money to operate the school until October, so we are scrambling frantically to raise money. We have just joined the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America, and we are very excited about this.

We would also like to tell you a little bit about the children. Lakota children are warm, friendly and very innocent (even those exposed to a lot of television.) They are willing and enthusiastic. Because of their spiritual/cultural upbringing they have a strong instinctual relationship with the spiritual world and yet are down-to-earth and practical. They have a wonderful sense of humor and seem to spend most of the day laughing. Art is an integral part of the Lakota culture and our children excel in all artistic activities.

This is a glimpse of our life here. It is a wonderful place to live and work. We would like to close by warmly thanking all those who contributed to us at the East Coast Waldorf Early Childhood conference in June. If you want to know anything else about the school, you may call, write, or e-mail us at: The Wolakota Waldorf School P.O. Box 527 Kyle, SD 57752 Phone: (605) 455-2487 e-mail cyouwwsc@gwtc.net