
The Lakota Waldorf School

~ Fallen Sorbel, Joyce Little Whiteman and Laurie Clark



The Lakota Waldorf School in Kyle, South Dakota is right in the heart of the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. It is located in one of the most impoverished counties in the nation and is a tuition-free indigenous school serving the Lakota children from early childhood through eighth grade. The School is a Lakota language immersion program for all of the children that attend.

Laurie Clark has had the privilege to mentor the early childhood teachers weekly during this pandemic year via Zoom and has been involved with this school for many years. Fallen Sorbel is the lead teacher in the early childhood class and Joyce Little Whiteman is the Lakota Language teacher, serving kindergarten through eighth grade.

Fallen feels strongly that in today's society it is vital that traditions and cultural relevance be kept alive and acknowledged in education, most importantly to protect a person's spirit. The Lakota people have virtues that pertain to treating others with respect and valuing the world of nature. The teachers feel that Waldorf education can help build these values and virtues for the young children in their care, always staying aware of Lakota cultural identity and consciousness.

Fallen has the deep conviction that Lakota traditions and cultural relevance must be kept alive and should be part of education. In her early childhood classroom, she guides the children and enhances their cultural awareness respectfully, in an implicit way, through "doing" the cultural practices, without direct explanations.

The morning begins with the children gathering in a circle where the traditional practice of smudging

takes place, which "purifies each of us and brings in positivity." Traditionally, sweet grass or sage is burnt and "gets rid of negative energy from the outside world." A prayer of thanks is sung in Lakota: *Maka sitomni, oyeh wau ca, tunkasila wicozani ki, namahuwe wopila epelo pilamiyiyielo*; this is loosely translated to mean, "All around the earth, the creator gave us life. We thank the creator for our health." A "Good morning, dear earth" song is also brought during this time. The children all sit down to eat a warm organic breakfast together. The children have learned how to ask for what they need in the Lakota language. *Mni wacin*, "I want water," or *Wakpe wacin*, "I want tea."

Creative play time follows breakfast. While the children play, the teachers are busy with practical work such as beading or other crafts. Transitions into cleanup time are all sung in Lakota.



Elements of the language are incorporated in all activities in the classroom. During watercolor painting, Fallen says, “Who have we here?” She shows the red paint, *sa*, the blue, *to*. The children enthusiastically name the colors. Bread baking is accompanied by a lovely song that is sung in unison, creating an atmosphere of community. Making connections with others is a significant value that lives in the heart of the Lakota culture. The fundamental understanding of this kind of connection in Lakota language is *Mitakuye Oyasin*, which means “We are all connected, we are all relatives.”

The beginning of circle time is held by the fluent Lakota speaker, Joyce Little White Man, or as the children call her, *Unci*, which means “grandmother.” She brings songs and verses that are all brought to the children in Lakota. Joyce has translated many of the Waldorf circles into Lakota as well. For the older children in the school, Joyce has gone on field trips with them, gathering the local plants, showing which ones are edible, and finding the plants that are used in Lakota ceremonies.

The children have plenty of outside time, and enjoy nature walks within the abundance of nature in the prairie lands surrounding the school. Stories are told to the children before a hearty lunch is served. Oral storytelling in the Lakota culture carries the importance of life lessons, traditional beliefs, and customary ways, all put into imaginative language. Some mystical Lakota creatures may be incorporated in a story, like Iktomi, the trickster.

Festivals and celebrations are a big part of the Lakota Waldorf School. There is a lantern walk with singing of Lakota songs, and the walk ends up in a circle of prayer. Blessings to those in need are said. Prayers that bring kindness and gratitude are brought. The Advent or winter spiral is also celebrated with the sound of drums. The drum signifies the beat of the heart, and each child walks through the spiral enkindling their light, ready to make the whole of the path brighter for the next child to come through.

Celebrations are significant in the Lakota culture and give an opportunity to have community gatherings. Powwows are a traditional all-school celebration. The children, and all of those who can dance, will dance for the elders and for those who are sick who cannot dance. Every child is encouraged to participate.

Fallen brings these thoughts about guiding the children through the seasons. “In the spring, we welcome back the thunder beings because they have been gone for quite some time. We try and take a trip to a sacred site. We watch the earth bring forth food and medicinal plants. When it is time to harvest, an offering is made. This practice shows gratitude. We thank the plants for returning. We offer this world to the children; it is beautiful and good. We will show respect to mother earth and mature to be kind to this planet that has merely been lent to us.” ♦



Fallen Sorbel is the lead teacher in the early childhood class at Lakota Waldorf School. Her commitment to the children and her Lakota community is to rebuild the Lakota language and cultural identity.

Joyce Little Whiteman is the Lakota Language teacher at the Lakota Waldorf School, serving kindergarten through eighth grade. She is re-enlivening the cultural heritage by sharing the traditions of the Lakota people with the children and teaching them their native language.

Laurie Clark has been involved in Waldorf early childhood teaching for four decades and has recently stepped away from lead teaching at the Denver Waldorf School. She is a prominent teacher trainer, author, workshop and conference presenter, and mentor. She currently has a small “home group” of very young children, which she loves! She and Nancy Blanning have co-authored *Movement Journeys* and *Circle Adventures*, Vol. 1 and 2.