

The Lakota Waldorf School

Mitakuye Oyasin, "We are all related"

• Laurie Clark and Patrice Maynard

The Mid-States Shared Gifting Group awarded AWSNA a grant that would provide two visits to the Lakota Waldorf School on the Pine Ridge Reservation in Kyle, South Dakota. The visits to this school were to determine the status and the level of sustainability of this school and to find helpful supports for its future development. Tom and Laurie Clark, long-time grades and kindergarten teachers at the Denver Waldorf School, received a call from Patrice Maynard, the Outreach and Development leader of AWSNA, to see if they would be interested in participating with her in such a project. They were in the midst of planning a half-year sabbatical and were honored to add this to the list of plans they had in place already, including Mexico and China. Theirs was not to be a restful sabbatical but a busy one full of lively adventures.

The first visit was in October of 2009 for three days. When they walked into the classroom, they met Verola Spider, the Lakota teacher. Verola spent these days working with Laurie Clark to make the room more inviting, and discussing the needs of the young child. Verola has many years of teaching experience and was taking the Lifeways training in Boulder, Colorado. Laurie and Verola were quick friends, comfortable with one another immediately; and they found commonality in their love of being with small children. Both shared humor and flexibility. These days of mentoring and coaching Verola in the classroom had Laurie demonstrating circle, cooking and baking, coloring, beeswax modeling, and story time. The children are given a hot breakfast, lunch and a snack each day before they go home at three pm, so there is a lot of cooking to be done! After the children left on the school bus, these two teachers would review the day together and plan for the following. They marveled at the strength and energy that the children had despite the destitution, the disruption, and the want that are part of all the children's lives at Pine Ridge. They are unusually beautiful children—open, and unburdened

by material possessions.

The next three-day visit in December of 2009 was spent deepening what had begun in October. Verola made a Lakota grandmother wool puppet with Suzanne Down in the Lifeways training. A goal for this program is to find ways to incorporate the Lakota language into the everyday life of the kindergarten day. The wool grandmother puppet (*umchee*, phonetically, in Lakota) would "help" by singing a lullaby in Lakota as she rocked her baby to sleep (*Ishteemah*) and told stories. They decided to have a parent evening and a community dinner for all of the families. The children helped prepare the meal during the kindergarten morning. They loved peeling and chopping the vegetables for a gigantic pot of soup. The community of the Denver Waldorf School had donated food, winter outerwear of all sizes, blankets, and toys for the children, which Laurie packaged carefully for each family to have as a gift. The Clarks brought all these things and much food with them in a trailer pulled by a borrowed SUV. The children were most delighted with the hula hoops and the warm mittens they received. One little girl, whose hands had chilblains because she had no gloves, was so happy with her mittens that she ate dinner with them on. There was much laughter, goodwill and fun that evening, with one particularly hilarious multi-aged moment with the hula hoops, and a beautiful traditional Lakota honoring ceremony for the three visitors. In the spring, Verola spent a week observing in Laurie's early childhood class at the Denver Waldorf School and stayed with the Clarks at their home. She is finishing her Lifeways training this fall in Milwaukee.

While Laurie Clark spent each day in the classroom, Patrice Maynard and Tom Clark spent long hours with the development coordinator, Isabel Stadnick. Isabel is a Swiss woman who attended the Basel Waldorf School from grades six through ten. She married Bob Stadnick, a Lakota tribal member, and they had three children together. When Bob died

in 1997, Isabel returned to Switzerland. While in Switzerland, Isabel obtained a degree in fundraising management. Since the founding of the school, Isabel has raised considerable funds in Europe and helped establish two foundations to be vessels of support for the school. Recently, Isabel wrote a book about her return to the Pine Ridge Reservation, *Wanna Waki*, which translates as “Now I am going home—My Life with the Lakota.” This book is a best seller in Switzerland and the proceeds from it also help to support the school. Tom and Patrice worked with Isabel and discussed the procedures that were in place for managing the school, fund raising, budgeting, and hiring practices. The financial records and practices were also reviewed in detail. The bookkeeping and accounting for the school is done by a CPA in Rapid City and the gifts are deposited directly through PayPal or direct deposit into the account set up for the Lakota School. The program is fail-safe and thorough. They also spent time with the board members of the school, engaging them in conversation about the history of the school, a master plan for future development, and procedural issues such as hiring and job descriptions. The managing Board of the Lakota Waldorf School comprises all Lakota tribal members.

Tom and Patrice also made two visits to the Education Department at the Oglala Lakota College (OLC) that is in close proximity to the Lakota Waldorf School. They met with the Chair of the Education Department, Tom Raymond, and engaged him in conversation about Waldorf Education. Mr. Raymond was extremely receptive. An experiential way of educating children with a spiritual basis has commonality with the Lakota ways. A seed was planted that would come to fruition the following year.

While there, the visiting teachers also attended two board meetings. Many topics were discussed and the groups recognized together the original intention of the school in 1992, which was to build the Lakota Waldorf School as a genuine Lakota school using Lakota language and rich culture as its heart. The Board has been working on the WECAN study and is making steady progress on this.

Following these two visits, Patrice Maynard helped the Lakota school apply to foundations in the U.S. Through her efforts in working with the board there has been a quickened interest in this school and the school has received the following:

1. A \$25,000 gift from the First Nations Development Institute for Capacity Building, organizational development for Board training and infrastructure building
2. A \$2,500 grant from RSF Social Finance to start a biodynamic garden for the school
3. A contribution of seeds for that garden from High Mowing Seeds in Vermont
4. An invitation from the Moore Charitable Trust for money to fund a teacher’s salary and a new bus
5. A gift from an anonymous foundation interested in supporting the cost of Waldorf teacher education and preparation

The school initiative began in 1992 when several elders and parents joined together and formed the Wolakota (meaning “harmony of the Lakota way”) Waldorf Society. The founders of the school included John Haas, at that time the Vice President of the Oglala Lakota College; Matilda Montileaux, a longtime teacher; and Saunie Wilson, also working at Oglala Lakota College. Robert Stadnick, Richard Moves Camp, and Norman Under Baggage were also amongst the founders. This group wanted to explore ways to help their young people find new meaning and light a candle in the midst of the darkness and the difficulties that they faced. The Pine Ridge Reservation is among the most impoverished reservations in the United States. Unemployment rates are around 85%, infant mortality is 300% higher than the national average, and the life-expectancy average is the shortest for any community in the Western Hemisphere outside of Haiti. Schools on the Pine Ridge Reservation are in the bottom 10% of school funding by the U.S. Department of Education and the High School dropout rate is 70%, compared to a national average of 11%. Perhaps the most staggering statistic is the teen suicide rate—150% higher than the national average.

The Wolakota Waldorf Society felt that bringing a new impulse in the education for the children of the reservation would give the best possibilities for the future generations. After exploring various methodologies, they felt that Waldorf education would be the best fit for the Lakota children and wondered if it would be possible to combine it with the Lakota culture and language. In order to explore this further, three of the spiritual leaders of

the community, Robert Stadnick, Richard Moves Camp and Norman Under Baggage, along with Robert's Swiss wife, Isabel, traveled to Dornach, Switzerland, to the Goetheanum to meet with Heinz Zimmerman. Heinz Zimmerman had been one of Isabel's teachers when she attended the Waldorf School in Basel, Switzerland. They sat around a large table and discussed their ideas about the creation of a Waldorf School and asked Dr. Zimmerman, "Can we create a Waldorf school that would incorporate the Lakota language and culture?" Dr. Zimmerman replied, "It would not be a Waldorf School without including the language and culture of your people." He gave them a tour of the Goetheanum and then arranged for this delegation of Lakota leaders to visit different Waldorf Schools in Switzerland, which included the schools in Basel, Bern, and Aesch. This group was also advised to contact the German organization, *Freunde der Erziehungskunst* (Friends of the art of teaching). This organization was the first to give donations to the Lakota endeavor. In the following years they have continued to support the school through organizing tours for the interested Lakota people to see Waldorf schools in Germany, Switzerland, and Holland. They also helped arrange speaking tours so that Robert Stadnick and others could speak about the school initiative on the Pine Ridge Reservation.

In 1994, the Kindergarten was built. A contractor named Bill Loafer donated his time. In the fall of 1994, Gregory Hudson, a trained Waldorf teacher from California on sabbatical, taught the first kindergarten class. He also taught an introductory course in Waldorf Education for one semester at the Oglala Lakota College. A Lakota man, Tony Brown Bull, was his assistant. A series of Waldorf teachers that included Martha Cablk, Robert David McEldowny, Chris Young, and Susan Bunting, came to teach and give workshops in Waldorf Education at the little school for a period of one to two years each. Then for various reasons, including the early passing of three of its original founders, the school closed in 2004. Following upon the deep dedication of these teachers, Patricia Lambert, a trained Waldorf Kindergarten teacher, came from California with newfound enthusiasm and the kindergarten reopened in 2007. Alongside her teaching duties, she even drove the little school bus that was needed to pick the children up and bring them home each day. When the bus needed fixing, Patricia used a Skype camera underneath the bus and asked her husband

(who remained in California) for instructions to repair the bus. The devotion and commitment of each of these teachers provided the continued existence for the school and paved the way for the vision of its future.

In 2009, the original intention of the school became a reality as two Lakota people, fluent Lakota speakers steeped in the culture, became the teachers. Verola Spider and Tabor White Buffalo are the current assistant and lead teachers, yearning for full training, enthusiastic about children and Waldorf education.

For two weeks in September of 2010, an introductory course was taught by Patrice Maynard and Tom and Laurie Clark about Waldorf Education. This was hosted by Oglala Lakota College at the Pajuta Haka College Center in Kyle, South Dakota. This course, which was financed through an independent foundation, introduced the basic philosophy that stands behind the curriculum and provided descriptions of kindergarten and grade school along with artistic, kinesthetic, and scientific activities. Participants painted, made lanterns, drew with crayons, modeled with clay and beeswax, wove crowns, played Choroí flutes, and experienced demonstrations with electricity and chemistry from the upper grade school science curriculum. Circle work from kindergarten and the early grades graced all lessons. Eurythmy was taught each day, by John McManus during the first week Barbara Richardson the second. There were a total of ten participants, including some practicing teachers and homeschool teachers, along with board members of the Lakota Waldorf School.

During the two-week course, Hansjoerg Hofrichter, representative of the Waldorf Stiftung, and David Mitchell, from AWSNA Publications and the Research Institute for Waldorf Education, visited the course, the College, and the Lakota Waldorf School. They were impressed with what they found and answered questions about Waldorf education in an OLC Education Department faculty meeting.

During the final recall session, paintings, clay sculptures of cows, buffalo and rabbits, beeswax figures, main lesson books, May crowns of sage and sunflowers, and drawings filled a table and decorated the walls. Mabel One Horn explained that her back and knee pain had been eliminated because of eurythmy. Others remembered the temperaments, the letters in movement, finding letters in pictures, the hand game Tabor White Buffalo taught, the

different stages of development of the child, the Chladni plate designs, the electricity on our tongues, and a whole blackboard full of things remembered. Three qualified individuals have come forward from this group to be fully trained. A program is being formed for the next three years that will dovetail with the culture of the Lakota, be recognized by the Oglala Lakota College, adopted by our Waldorf Teacher Training Institutes, and will give the Lakota School the trained teachers it needs over time. The future looks challenging and promising. Everyone could see together in the two-week course what Waldorf education could give to the people of this beautiful and destitute land.

After the first day of the two-week course, one teacher went to the school and said, "I am going to be a Waldorf teacher for the rest of my life." If transformation and cultural strength can be found again for this small community, much might be possible.

