

Sydney Metrano

Serving the Lakota People

Ursuline's motto of *Serviam* is a call to action to make a positive impact on the lives of others. Service opportunities are plentiful, with numerous organizations doing great work in or near many communities. Yet, some of the people who are most in need of help are those distant or removed from the centers of population because it is challenging to get people and resources to these locations. In the summer of 2023, I embarked on a week-long service-learning trip to one such location – the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, home to the Oglala Lakota Nation. It has been over 150 years since the United States government forcibly assigned the Lakota to live there, and they are still fighting to protect their way of life and very existence. Today, Pine Ridge Reservation is the poorest county in the United States and has the lowest life expectancy in the country.

I volunteered at Pine Ridge with Re-member, a non-profit organization committed to improving the quality of life for the Lakota people by fulfilling their basic needs and providing solutions to issues that negatively impact the community. Through the projects I worked on, I was able to contribute to this mission. We started the week off with some projects that addressed immediate needs, building outhouses and bunk beds in Re-member's workshop. Many homes do not have indoor plumbing and are so overcrowded that family members must share beds or sleep on the floor. Another project I worked on was making essential upgrades to a mobile home, where we installed skirting to help with heating and cooling, as many residents live without electricity. I also built stairs and a deck to enable safe and stable access since the mobile homes have elevated entrances, given that they sit above ground level.

One project that I found especially fulfilling was working on establishing a nutrition center to reduce food insecurity, offer access to fresh food, and provide classes. I took part in setting up multiple greenhouses and planting community gardens, which will serve to grow food as well as herbs and

flowers that can be used for natural health remedies. The unfortunate truth is that affordable, healthy food is scarce on the reservation and Pine Ridge has one of the highest rates of diabetes in the country. Additionally, many individuals lack knowledge about proper nutrition. Therefore, improving both nutrition knowledge and diet could make a significant positive impact on the community.

My time spent volunteering at Pine Ridge falls under community engagement. Re-member and its volunteers are committed to helping the Lakota become a more self-sufficient community that can better sustain its way of life and traditions. To succeed in this mission, it is critical to build trust with the community, which can only be achieved by focusing on establishing long-term relationships and being integrated with the people of Pine Ridge.

The experience at Pine Ridge had a profound impact on me. It opened my eyes to the inequity in our country and deepened my respect for the Lakota people. Through cultural immersion, guest speakers, and site visits, I learned so much about the rich history and culture of the Lakota. What's more, the experience helped me to better appreciate not only the many blessings that I have, but also my ability and power to make change at the individual level. As a 15-year-old, I traveled over 1,000 miles to one of the most desolate parts of the United States and worked on construction projects, despite having no experience building things or using power tools. I am now even more confident that I can take on different and bigger challenges to positively impact others. Lastly, the experience increased my desire to serve and was the impetus for doing another week-long volunteer trip, for a different cause, the following month. I am already planning my return trip to Pine Ridge this coming summer as well as exploring ways to help the Lakota people from afar. Stay tuned!

Serviam is and will continue to be an important part of my life. For years to come, I will seek opportunities - big and small - to use my talents and gifts to help and serve others, contribute to society, and hopefully make a long-lasting, positive difference in the world.