

Guilford College Freshmen Trip Reflections on the Bonner Scholars' Work Trip to the Crow Reservation

As always, our trip to the Crow Reservation this year was a powerful spiritual and cultural experience. Being immersed in the beautiful Montana landscape and ancient native traditions affected our students and staff members deeply. We accomplished many physical things during our time at the Center Pole. Our group helped to add a porch roof to the newly built Well-Known Buffalo Cultural Center, sorted large amounts of food and clothing donations, and performed general clean-up and yard work. We were privileged to make new friends, learn about the Crow legends of the constellations as we observed an amazingly clear night sky, visit the site of Little Bighorn Battle, ride horses, and witness a competition of the ancient Indian sport of hand games.

Most important, however, was the spiritual work of the trip. Our group was welcomed into the Crow traditions and belief system. Speakers came and explained to us the history and traditions of the Native American Church. Many of us were able to take part in a church ceremony, an amazing all-night experience of music, prayer, and meditation. Others helped prepare traditional food for the ceremony, to feed participants both spiritually and physically. Every member of our group participated in the ancient ritual of the sweat lodge. These experiences were physically and spiritually humbling, bringing each of us closer to the earth, each other, and our own spiritual and emotional selves.

Regular reflection meetings were held to prepare for and process these experiences, and students were also given two readings, written by Sara Beth Terrell, on spirituality and vocation. Those readings, and the oral group reflections, guided by the framework of questions about spirituality and vocation we had prepared before the trip, truly helped students to better process and articulate their experiences. Each member of our group kept a private daily journal, and each was required to submit a final written reflection about the experience. We found overwhelmingly that the content and quality of these reflections was tremendously improved this year, and we believe that is due to the guiding questions and intentional vocabulary of faith, spirituality, and vocation that we used with our students. The direction and assistance we received from the Initiative on Faith and Practice helped to make our students' experiences richer and more meaningful, and for that we are extremely grateful. Attached are a few quotes from student reflections, which demonstrate their growth in their own words. While each person had a very individual reaction and journey, all experienced a renewal of the spirit and a reaffirmation of their call to service. We look forward to the opportunity to continue our trip reflections in the fall, and to help students bring their experiences on the reservation back to their peers and their service work at Guilford.

-Claire Dixon, Bonner Scholars Coordinator

Student Reflections

“Basically, the entire trip was a spiritual journey for me....It was amazing to be in a place that focuses on the meaning and symbolism of everything. Even the direction of the logs on the fire for the sweat had meaning. So often I do things without any meaning and just want to get them over with, but after this I really want to pay attention to small things in my life and what they might symbolize.” - John-Wilson Irwin

“I have always been someone who people turned to for support and I have always been interested in massage. During the last year I had stopped doing both until I went to Montana. In the first sweat, I went through some of my own healing, and at the same time I opened myself to being there for others, and I had some very powerful connections with a few people. After everything I experienced, the last sweat was particularly powerful. I tried to write a poem about it:

Cedar

Soaking into my naked skin with the hot damp air.

The fabric of silence broken by a woman’s voice praying in crow.

Until now I had forgotten myself in my life

Forgotten why I am alive,

But here, in the womb of the earth,

I remember.

I hate labels and have always refused to call myself by what people called me, a hippie, environmentalist, activist, liberal, dreamer etc. I have also always had a hard time picking just one place or issue to do service for. In the last sweat I realized that part of who I am and what I am supposed to do is to be a healer, for the people, for the earth etc., to heal where it is needed and I am available and that included my own healing.” – Eliza Hudson

“All my life I’ve felt like those around me have had everything figured out; my friends have majors and know who they want to marry, how many kids they want to have. There is not a point I can remember where I’ve felt sure of something about my future. My family has asked if I’m going to get married, if I want kids, what I want to do with my education. My responses are always uncertain. Not that anyone is certain about the future, but I feel particularly unsure. I am surprisingly comfortable with this. Over these past 10 days after an emotionally and academically difficult end of the year, in the wide open spaces of Montana I’ve had a lot of time to think, reflect, let my mind and soul wander.

Reading Sara Beth’s essay about vocation and faith, I realize that perhaps I have more of an idea of my calling or vocation in life than I had previously been aware of. From the time I was very young, I’ve felt called to help people; a simple and broad desire I know, but nevertheless a calling. I realize now that some of my friends and family who know exactly what they want to do in the future have, it seems, forced their amazing visions (for their lives and others) into the constraints of societal norms, the boxed

options of existing jobs and careers. Seeing what Peggy White has done for her people through the Center Pole Foundation and how she manages to live her dream, her vocation every day in all that she does was truly inspiring. Though, at times, I was sometimes frustrated with Peggy's ways, cultural differences and misunderstandings, and miscommunication, I was able to get a glimpse at all the good she has done and continues to do for her family and her community.

This past year was my first away from home. I did a lot of learning and growing, a lot of things for myself. I was on my own and had only to care for myself, and that is what I did. Spending that time on the reservation on the earth with a people whose traditions are old and beliefs are deeply held and being so welcomed into the community was mentally, emotionally, and spiritually healing and revitalizing. And doing the work that we did there reaffirmed my desire to help and to give. At the end of our last sweat, Peggy reminded all of us women to live in circles or cycles, to maintain the circles in our lives in order to maintain a spiritual and universal balance. For me, this means giving in return for all that I have received." - Liz Maillie

"Whether as a part of some higher power's grand scheme, or just the interconnectedness of life and people, we are all cogs in a great wheel that we can never fully understand. We are never as great or as powerful or effective as when we're working together. That's probably the biggest reason these trips are so fulfilling, because we are accomplishing something great together, and that's amazing, that's beautiful.I think that because we are Bonner Scholars, we have decided that for ourselves, we have a very special vocation to serve, to learn, and to help create and maintain communities to the benefit of all." - Mike Wallace