Young Warriors

Indian youth share an important lesson with us

by Charles Trimble

Through Lakota Country Times, indiansmn.com, Facebook and You Tube, the story went out to many thousands of people about Lakota students at Todd County High School on the Rosebud Reservation and their response to ABC's Diane Sawyer's program "Hidden America: The Children of the Plains," which many Native people considered a negative depiction of life on the reservations in South Dakota.

"We're more than that," was the theme of the short video presentation, and it featured students with words written on their arms, face and feet, words expressing determination, hope, family, love, tradition. But most of all, there was nothing but smiling faces. Utilizing available technology on the campus, the students put together a creative package that no public relations firm could have done.

I saw the video presentation and was impressed and pleased by the message they sent. It was a positive message that told the world that there is much to be proud of out here on the Reservations, and the youth are the essence of that pride. It was uplifting, and classy.

It was not an in-your-face message. But rather was it a denial that drugs and gangs are a major problem on the reservations, and youth suicides are at an alarming rate. However, the students reaffirmed the determination to do something about it, and proved proof in the students themselves that things are working.

The youth on the reservations give us hope, even despite the prevalence of drugs and gangs and suicides. For example, a December 22, 2011, article from the American Indian Graduate Center heralded the following amazing fact:

"In the minds of many Americans, the Pine Ridge Reservation of the Ogala Sioux Tribe embodies all the problems of American Indians and Alaska Natives. Yet on this, one of the nation's largest Native American Reservations, four American Indian scholars have set a standard virtually any town or city in the United States will find it very difficult to match. In 2011, four scholars who were raised in the historic village of Oglala, pop. 1290 (2010 Census), were honored for their work at the graduate level, one of whom is pursuing a Ph. D degree and three having received Ph.D degrees during the year. Some experts have speculated that, at least this year, it may be the highest per capita number of Ph.D.s of any municipality in the nation."

These are the facts that need to be heralded throughout Indian Country and in the general public, for they help dispel the impression that our tribal youth wunder the reservation countryside, hallowed-eyed and disparaged, haunted by ghosts of our tragic history. It is often said that our youth have no Indian role models, yet those role models are everywhere, but need to be pointed out.

There are Native Americans in the White House and on Capitol Hill in Washington, in state offices, and many are unheralded in jobs of great responsibility in offices and factories across the country. And indeed there are many role models on the reservations—special people who stayed home precisely to develop the homelands and provide education and opportunity to future generations of our tribes.

The recent brouhaha caused by Diane Sawyer's ABC program "Hidden America: The Children of the Plains," brought forth an interesting societal inner conflict in Indian Country, especially in the Northern Plains. On the one hand, we come close to seeming boast about the extent of our poverty and social pathology: highest infant mortality, lowest life expectancy: highest unemployment; staggering rate of alcoholism and domestic violence in the poorest counties in the nation. On the other hand, we resent it when someone else points out those same statistics.

Diane Sawyer told no lies, nor did she exaggerate any facts or figures. She did point out at least one bright spot—Red Cloud Indian School, but unfortunately she gave the impression that it was an elite academy of sorts, and did not point out that it operates on a much smaller budget than any school of comparable size on the reservation, and drains little of the funds from the federal budgets appropriated for the reservations.

And she did give the opportunity for Indian children to express their own dreams for their future. I don't know what the answers would be if we were to ask any of those children featured in the ABC show, or their parents or relatives, what they thought of the show. But I'm sure there would be positive responses, and some positive outcomes in terms of benefits.

Nevertheless, the Todd County High School students did a commendable job, as did their teachers. One important lesson that came out of all this was that positive action can be taken when we might feel offended or misrepresented. What the students did was far better and more effective than grumbling and stewing in self-pity and resentment. They and their teachers are to be commended.

As one You Tube viewer put it, "Go Falcons."