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Guest Post | A Native American Student Responds to a Times Article About His Home

By *KATHERINE SCHULTEN*

An article by Timothy Williams, "[Brutal Crimes Grip an Indian Reservation](#)," which appeared on the front page of The New York Times on Feb. 3, begins:

WIND RIVER INDIAN RESERVATION, Wyo. - At a boys' basketball game here last month, Wyoming Indian High School, a perennial state power, was trading baskets with a local rival. The players, long-limbed and athletic, are among the area's undisputed stars, and their games one of its few diversions. On this night, more than 2,500 cheering, stomping people came to watch.

Outside the gym, in a glass trophy case, are photographs of players from recent championship teams. Someone peered in and, moving his finger along the line of smiling faces, delivered a cruel counterpoint: killed in a car accident at 19 while intoxicated; murdered in his 20s; struck in the head with an ax not long after graduation.

Students on the [Wind River reservation](#) read and discussed the piece in classes at [Fort Washakie Charter High School](#), and, according to Michael L. Read, an English teacher there, felt that "the article seemed to reinforce the stereotypes that they get labeled with frequently." In an e-mail, he wrote, "These students know that there are problems in their community, but they also love it and are fully committed to honoring their ancestors and the future."

One of the students, 19-year-old Willow Pingree, [posted a comment to that effect on The Times's site](#). It reads, in part:

I have lived on the reservation since I was born. I will be only twenty in July, but as far as I'm concerned, I've seen my share of good and bad things on this reservation. Not EVERYTHING about this reservation is bad. Sure there is a huge problem with domestic violence and alcoholism, but we try to work together as a community to fight it. We have not given up. ... What many people who are not from this reservation, or perhaps any in particular, don't understand is that there is a strong spiritual bond that we have with our culture and our homeland. Alcoholism has spread like the Black Plague of the European countries, but we do what we can to fight it. ... It is a sad thing that people are quick to judge about a place where they have not lived.

The principal of the school, Shad Hamilton, invited the reporter, Mr. Williams, to learn more about the school and community, and set up a conference call

with some of the faculty members and students, including Willow. Mr. Williams suggested Willow write a fuller piece.

Below, the essay that resulted, lightly edited from the original.

My Home

By Willow Pingree

The smell of fry bread and burgers, the laughter of friends and family reminiscing about good old times, the sound of music and the sight of people dressed in regalia, dancing inside an arbor while spectators watch from bleachers around the big arena. You'd find all of this at the Annual Eastern Shoshone Indian Days, or the Northern Arapaho Celebration powwow on the Wind River Indian Reservation in Wyoming.

As you walk around the outside of the dance arbor, you'd see crowds of people walking around you, sitting against wooden posts built along the outer rim of the powwow arbor: people sitting around a big circular drum, beating on it together in one rhythm and singing together in harmony. As the singers continue blasting their voices to the sky, the dancers slide and sway to the heartbeat of the people, the powerful sound of the drum. Surrounding them, the rolling hills, the sage brush covering the beautiful prairies, the awe-inspiring view of the towering Wind River Mountains.

This is my home, and it has been the home of my Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapaho people long before my generation.

During the time of our ancestors, the Shoshone and Arapaho people once were enemies who constantly fought each other for land and food. After the reservation was established in 1876, the federal government moved the Northern Arapaho people to a temporary home on the Shoshone reservation in Wyoming. Washakie, chief of the Eastern Band of Shoshones, allowed the Arapaho tribe to stay on the reservation while the government sought a different home for them. The Northern Arapaho tribe was never relocated to a different reservation, nor were they ever asked to leave by the Shoshones, and so they remained on the Shoshone reservation, now called the Wind River Reservation. Today, both tribes share the reservation in what some people consider to be separate communities: Fort Washakie, Arapahoe and Ethete.

Both tribes maintain their own form of tribal government and help with funding for programs that combat drug, alcohol, domestic and sexual abuse and poverty. Indeed, the people of the reservation face these problems,

perhaps on a daily basis; however, that does not mean that there are not positive aspects of the reservation.

The people of both tribes still have their languages, their traditional beliefs and values. Involvement in tribal government allows people the opportunity to learn more about the history of the tribes and the reservation. Powwows, Sun Dances, picnics, memorial events such as walks, runs and feasts: These are just a few of the things that the people of the Wind River Reservation do to keep people, especially the young ones, away from drugs, alcohol and violence and help the communities and cultures become stronger.

The reservation sells no alcohol. However, most people buy their alcohol off-reservation. Alcoholism is often a contributing factor in the fatalities that have occurred on the reservation. That is not to say that the Shoshone or Arapaho tribes are not doing something to deal with these issues. The tribal councils grant funding to different programs to help the people overcome addiction. Substance abuse counseling is offered to those who need help. The Sho-Rap Lodge is a residency in Fort Washakie which helps people who have struggled with alcohol. White Buffalo Recovery is another program that helps tribal members deal with drug and/or alcohol problems. Our people are offered help on a daily basis. It is up to the people themselves to give one another guidance and support in order to improve our communities.

Education is an important aspect of our culture. Long before the white education system, Native people all across the continent learned education from the teachings of their elders. Young people were taught to respect everything and everyone around them and to have a positive attitude to maintain balance and harmony in their lives.

After the Plains Indian Wars were over, and all tribes were confined to reservations, the Native children were forced to go to boarding schools to learn the Christian way of education. Their long hair, which was a symbol of pride and honor, was cut off and they were prohibited from speaking in the language of their people.

However, as time passed, the Native people of America began to renew the pride that they had in their cultures and languages, and began standing up for their rights as nations. Soon, schools began accepting the traditional values of Native people and even began teaching Native languages in schools. As Chief Washakie said: "I fought to keep our land, our water and our hunting grounds. Today, education is the weapon my people will need to protect them."

The Wind River Reservation has a youth council called United National Indian Tribal Youth, or Unity, Its motive is to encourage kids and young adults to step up to be the voice for all young people. Babies and kids learn well at a very young age, and for them to learn their culture, their languages and their histories at that age will be crucial to the tribes' survival.

Reservations all across North America are struggling with alcoholism, drug addictions and violence. It not only happens on reservations, but all over. That is why it is important for people to remember who they are and hold their traditions close to them.

No matter what negative things we face every day, nothing can break our spirit. We will not give up the war to save our culture or our languages, the war that all Native people in America have been fighting for since 1492. I will fight to ensure the survival of our cultures and languages for the rest of my days on this Earth.

Ha'ho! Hoo-wee-hoo! (Thank you!)

*The Learning Network would like to suggest that **any** school could do what Fort Washakie Charter High did and have students take a critical look at media coverage of their community, whether that coverage comes from The Times, a local TV station or newspaper, advertising or anywhere else.*