

In July of 2010, the Southeastern Pennsylvania Synod will be sending 100 youth and adults on a servant trip to two Native American reservations in South Dakota. This particular event happens once every three years, and registration will be open to youth and adults from all congregations throughout the synod. The registration letter and all other trip materials from the synod are available, and I encourage you to read them all, but I wanted to tell you a little bit more about the trip from a participant's perspective.

I went to South Dakota back in 2004, and it is certainly a trip that I will never forget. At first it was a bit overwhelming – so many folks from so many different churches from all over the synod. But strangers quickly became friends through large group activities and small group chats, and I soon got to know many of the people with whom I'd be spending the next twelve days.

I was part of the day camp team on the Rosebud reservation, in a small community called Two Strike. There was a youth center there which was not much more than four walls and a roof, but it was where we met about 25 local children who—as it turns out—touched our lives far more than we touched theirs. Approximately 93% of Lakota children live below the poverty line, and many of the kids that came to the day camp did so without shoes on their feet or breakfast in their bellies.

During our first day in Two Strike I met a boy named Sonny. The day camp team was making crafts and playing games with most of the other children, but Sonny was sitting outside on the curb all by himself. The fact is that none of us even knew he was there until another child pointed to him and said, "Sonny isn't playing." I walked over to Sonny and asked if he wanted to play with the other kids. "No," he said quietly, looking down at the ground. I sat down next to him on the curb. "Do you want to draw a picture or paint?" He shook his head slowly. We both sat there for a minute, not saying a word. Then I started picking up the small stones and pebbles that were in the street next to the curb – "Let's see what we can do with these," I said, and began to make little shapes with them on the ground. A line here, a circle there. I noticed that Sonny was watching, if only out of the corner of his eye. "That one looks like a tree," Sonny finally said, pointing at a group of stones. "Yeah, I guess it does," I agreed, smiling. And that's how our relationship began, simply and plainly, with a few stones and a kind gesture. That's really all most of these kids really needed and wanted—someone to show that they cared about them.



Me and my buddy Sonny

For the next several days, if Sonny was at day camp he was by my side. But that's only if I wasn't already giving him a piggyback ride or swinging him around in circles by his arms. It made me dizzy, but it made him laugh. He couldn't get enough! And it was all I could do to catch my breath before the next child asked for a turn. All of the day camp kids loved to be hugged, tickled, chased after and played with. Everyday we would give them little trinkets and toys, and they grabbed them up as fast as we could hand them out. By the end of the week every member of the day camp team had developed a special bond with at least one child, and when it was time for us to leave on the last day, **we** were the ones crying.

Friendships that were made between participants during that trip remain to this day. Quite recently, one adult who I met while working on the day camp team lost her fight with leukemia after being diagnosed nearly a year ago. While attending her funeral the memories of that trip came flooding back, helping to ease the sadness of the moment. It was truly moving and heartwarming to see so many of the familiar faces gather to honor and remember her, most of whom may never have met if not for a servant trip almost five years prior.

And so I encourage you to consider taking part in the South Dakota trip next year. It promises to be fun, fulfilling, challenging, eye-opening and rewarding all rolled into one.

In Christ,

--Brent Dean

