



AmeriCorps volunteers are learning just as much as they are teaching

Print Page

By Jomay Steen, Journal Staff Writer

PINE RIDGE -- Ted Rossini has fallen for the humor. The 21-year-old AmeriCorps-National Civilian Community Corps member teaches a job readiness program at the Boys & Girls Club of Lacreek in Martin on Pine Ridge Indian Reservation.

The Westminster, Md., native describes it as a satellite of the various programs he and eight other AmeriCorps members are teaching at the SuAnne Big Crow Boys & Girls Club in Pine Ridge.

While his class of 10 students learned the basics of filling out job applications, punctuality and making a good impression, Rossini learned that the subtle art of Native-style teasing has begun to rub off on him.

"You know how they will say something and then say 'nyah?'" Rossini, who wears his red hair tied in a ponytail, asked. "I said that the other day.

"They got these big grins on their faces," Rossini said.

While serving the residents of Pine Ridge, the AmeriCorps volunteers are finding the community members are teaching them about Lakota culture - and about themselves.

As part of the Power Hour, team members help mentor local students with homework, reading skills, computer classes and also schedule times for crafts, library arts and games at the Boys & Girls Club.

The group works from 1 p.m. to 10 p.m. weekdays, and the Martin team finishes and closes its doors by 7 p.m.

The volunteers are learning a lot, an AmeriCorps team leader said.

Kirsten Thibodeau said the team has impressed her by surpassing all of her expectations and community goals.

"They make my job fun and easy," she said. "They're very motivated to get into the community and do more than what they've been asked to do."

This is Thibodeau's second year of service and the second time she has served in Pine Ridge.

"It's so good to be back," Thibodeau said.

Never having traveled west of her home in Albany, N.Y., the 23-year-old leader said the travel and community programs inspired her to re-enlist in AmeriCorps-NCCC.

"It's a great organization," she said.

Erica Haas, 23, of Watertown, Mass., is helping to create a volunteer manual for the club.

She recalled her first impression of the area after seeing Whiteclay, Neb. Haas described her shock when the team traveled through the border town.

"People were drinking on the street," she said. "It was really sad."

But after she saw Pine Ridge, met a few people and settled into her new living quarters, her initial fears were calmed. "I can deal with this," she said.

Thibodeau and her team are completing the second of their four rounds of service. Their Pine Ridge program will end May 26, when they will leave for various assignments at other locations.

The mixed group of men and women, ages 18 to 24, must each complete 1,700 hours of service during the 10-month program.

Some, such as Rossini, have taken a break from college. A few enlist directly from high school, some have put their careers on hold, and others are fresh out of college but not yet in the job market.

During their service, members receive lodging, meals, uniforms, health benefits, loan forbearance and a living allowance of about \$4,000. Upon completion of service, members receive \$4,725 to help pay for college or to pay student loans.

The nine-member team works together for rounds one, two and four. The third round reshuffles the members into new groups.

"You're immersed into the community, and that's when you learn a lot," Thibodeau said.

The group will complete 80 hours of independent service learning and visited Wounded Knee last week as part of that learning.

Counting her fingers, Thibodeau runs through what has intrigued the group about the Oglala since they have arrived and what they want to learn while in the community.

"Spirituality, current issues, how tribal council works, how the federal government runs," she said. "There's so much to learn here."

For information or applications, visit www.americorps.org or call 1-800-942-2677.

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