



BEN GOOD BUFFALO

ON HISTORY, HERITAGE & LAKOTA VALUES

“Take whatever is offered and don’t turn anyone away if they don’t have enough. If someone is hurting, you help them. Have people in your heart — help that person. For me, I tell them the positive side – be yourself.” ~ Ben Good Buffalo, a citizen of the Oglala Sioux Tribe

Ben Good Buffalo is a resident and citizen of the Oglala Sioux Tribe in southwestern South Dakota. At 68 years of age, he is an Elder and a father. He has been raising his two girls, Victoria and Rubi, who are now in middle school, since the eldest was 3 and the youngest an infant. About 12 years ago, they moved to the small tribal community of Red Shirt on the Pine Ridge Reservation.

Military Service

Ben grew up in the community of Payabya, to the south between the larger communities of Oglala and Pine Ridge. He attended Flandreau Indian School on the eastern side of the state, and then volunteered for the military as one way to show bravery (a Lakota value). As a Marine, he served from 1968 to 1971, returning home “after getting blown away.” For Ben, the hardest part of military service was “being ordered around and wearing the same clothes. I used my Lakota instincts and that helped me.”

Protecting the Environment

Taught by his grandfather about treaties, Ben is now passing on those teachings and the Lakota values to his daughters. Ben sees recent (land) consolidation agreements and state compacts (for gaming rights) as a loss of sovereignty and a violation of the treaties, and he credits many of the tribes’ challenges to colonization. “Treaty law equals freedom,” he says, “free to hunt and fish. There are so many resources out there for Lakota—like the water.”

Ben is glad to see a lot of people, boaters and non-Natives supporting protection of the environment and local water sources. He elaborated about the impact of contaminated water, not just for the Lakota, but for all the other thousands of people who rely on shared water sources.

Embracing Lakota Culture in Education

From his traditional upbringing to his military service, he sees the value of ensuring language and culture is embedded into the school curriculum. “There is a positive correlation between better grades and teaching language and culture [to our youth].” On the day of PWNA’s visit, Ben helped out with the morning songs at the school.

Ben talks about teaching his own daughters to give and be generous, another Lakota value. “I took Rubi and Victoria one summer to the Yakama Tribe in Washington to visit my sister. They attended classes in marketing and telemarketing, then returned home and started selling pop, ice cream and water. I told them... ‘water is free—grandmother earth will be mad at you’ ...so they offered the water for free and sold the soda and ice cream.” Even though each item was priced, Ben told them, “take whatever is offered and don’t turn anyone away if they don’t have enough. If someone is hurting, you help them. Have people in your heart — help that person. For me, I tell them the positive side – be yourself.”

Ben feels that graduation ceremonies are the thing that most positively reflects his community. “We honor them [graduates] with songs, talking positively of how this group is going to change things. People are smiling, and seeing how parents react as they graduate. Why can’t we live like that every day — positive, a moment of happiness.”

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