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As the drum, the sacred heartbeat of the Nation, reverberates in my soul, and the crisp, shrill voices of the men singing a vivacious intertribal song send chills down my spine, I allow my mind to wander. It sojourns to a place that most Ojibwe teenagers on the Bad River Indian Reservation fail to acknowledge. My thoughts become clouded like the summer skies before a storm approaches as I ponder why a majority of youth on my reservation do not have any connection to their own native roots; they know nothing about respect for elders, the precious earth, and themselves. They turn to alcohol, drugs, violence, and gangs instead of prayer, sweat lodges, powwows, wild rice harvesting, and beading. The detachment that native youth express from who we once were as Anishinaabeg, Original People, has proven to be an expanding problem on my reservation.

Although I was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, I was raised on the “rez.” As I grew up on the seemingly lonesome and isolated Bad River reservation, I witnessed and endured a lot of things that most non-native children probably hadn’t been through. I’ve had close family members go to prison, and I’ve had family members die from complications due to alcoholism. Kids who I grew up with and who were once my best friends in grade school now drink, do drugs, and go to jail regularly. Some are in gangs while others have children of their own and have dropped out of school. The shock of seeing my peers being sucked into the vicious cycle of reservation life is close to unbearable, but it’s the norm in this area. The youth on my rez choose to be “cool” and party instead of powwow, and the fact that nobody strives to defeat the embarrassingly correct stereotypes of Native Americans of my reservation makes me writhe; very few people try to obtain academic achievement instead of working at the casino, drowning their sorrows in cheap beer, and raising a clan of children that will mimic the calamitous ways of their parents.

My friends and family members close to my age have all gotten drunk and high, and most have been sent to jail or treatment centers. They don’t know an ounce of the Ojibwe language beyond simple commands, animals, and numbers that have been repeated throughout the reservation since they were young. Often times, my friends are astounded by how much Ojibwe I know and how involved I am with our culture. I’m dumbfounded when I see how much we as a people have lost already. It’s heartbreaking to watch our traditions slip through our fingers like water from the lake. Drip, drop, drip, drop. Are we soon to lose our whole handful of water?

The question that is scarcely asked amongst Bad River tribal members today is why do our youth reject their culture to walk the daunting Black Road? It is my belief that Bad River youth turn to alcohol, drugs, and gangs because of lack of leadership on our reservation. For Native Americans aged 15-24, the alcohol-related death rate is seventeen times higher than the national average (Cross). High death rates occur because children grow up seeing their parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and others in the community abuse drugs and alcohol. The only people that the younger generations have to look up to are the same people that are teaching them the lifestyle that is destroying them. For kids being raised on the rez, the options for a future lie within the dreaded boundaries of the reservation- at the casino, in a marijuana pipe, in

prescription pills, and at the bottom of a beer can. Parents and guardians of Native American children in Bad River continuously fail to educate their kids about their Anishinaabe traditions.

A second reason why Bad River youth are not in touch with their culture is because of forces outside of the reservation. As American Indian teenagers, we are constantly surrounded by a world that is not originally Ojibwe, and this is a world we cannot effectively call our own. We must try to fit into the non-native society beyond the alienated Indian reservation. Often called “the white man’s world,” it has taught teenagers that being traditional is not exactly “cool,” so youth now run wildly about in baggy clothes, crooked baseball caps, and overpriced sneakers as they throw up gang signs. They party hard and don’t attend school because school does not fit into their utopia of a “gangster” lifestyle.

Native American gangs, such as the notorious Native Mob from nearby Minneapolis, Minnesota, have begun to corrupt the young indigenous minds of the rez. In an interview with *Indian Country Today Media Network* about the Native Mob, Crystal Goose, a Leech Lake Ojibwe tribal member stated, “I understand that people are afraid, but we need to be more involved with our youth.” She also points out that, “Although these teenagers act tough, they are often like little boys on the inside who need help,” (Pember). Goose reminds readers that adolescents are not meant to join gangs, go to prison, or be killed in gang related activity. Trailing beside gang life is drinking, popping pills, smoking marijuana, selling drugs, and fighting. Ojibwe people never drank alcohol in the purest of days, nor did they do drugs or fight for no reason. Despite the history of our people, American Indian youth in this area still have the nerve to say that they have “Native pride.” I shake my head at the catastrophic irony and blasphemy that my generation creates. Their actions are what non-natives depict us by- no good alcoholics that only cause trouble. Our youth do not care to change the way that society looks upon us with belittling, stereotypical eyes.

The discomfiting knowledge of the vanishing culture on my reservation in northern Wisconsin has greatly impacted my future career choice as a social worker. My educational goal is to obtain my PhD in social work. Professionally, I plan on returning to Bad River to work with kids on my own reservation. I want to help teach them the things that I was taught as my mother and father raised me in our small home, like respecting and honoring our traditions. On top of helping juveniles with their educational, family, and living situations, I plan on getting to know them as a friend and as a mentor. I want to help them familiarize themselves with Ojibwe cultural teachings, such as the language, wild rice harvesting, powwows, maple sap harvesting, hunting, fishing, beading, and so forth. I want to give the upcoming generations something that I’ve seen missing in Bad River- hope for a better future. My dream is to inspire all of the young eyes so desperately searching for positive role models in the vicinity of their reservation homes. I believe that allowing our children to learn about our culture will save them from future delinquency. Tradition will replace poison and we will flourish as a people- one Nation.

Works Cited

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