

# LAKOTA YOUTH SOLSTICE CAMP

## BACKGROUND

Norma Rendon, an elder with the Oglala Lakota Sioux Tribe and Founder/CEO of Where All Women Are Honored, recognized the need for a Lakota-based education to build youth skills, knowledge, and awareness to prevent all forms of violence. Along with her team, Norma developed a curriculum based on storytelling and Lakota Culture to approach the education and awareness needs of Lakota youth. The curriculum was implemented at Lakota Tech High School in Pine Ridge, SD during the 2022-2023 school year, and focused on the prevention of sexual assault, domestic violence, teen dating violence, and sex trafficking, all while utilizing Lakota thought and philosophy by storytelling.

At the end of the academic year, many students vocalized wanting to continue the educational classes. Although the primary focus of the classes was to prevent violence through education, youth were also taught culture, language, and creation stories to facilitate connections between their culture and violence prevention.

## SOLUTION

Due to the interest shown among youth and to mitigate the problems tribal youth face today, Norma and her team decided to host a summer camp for students that wanted to continue learning. Norma and the SD Network Against Family Violence and Sexual Assault began working closely with the Rape Prevention Education (RPE) grant and the SD Department of Health to help purchase tipis and other supplies. The camp was meant to continue honoring the traditional way of bringing forth tribal values through cultural events, where youth could learn about sexual violence awareness through spiritual and cultural activities. The camp was named *Aku Icu* (Taking It Back) to promote the concept of being a good relative and teach youth to be a good relative with their friends, family, and in the future.

## SUMMARY

Originally, the plan was to hold one camp, but many youth throughout the area showed high interest in attending. Therefore, in Summer 2023, Norma and her colleagues held three separate camps for four days each. The camps were held on sacred land of the Oglala Sioux Tribe near Kyle, SD. A total of 127 boys and girls attended the camps, all around 11-15 years of age.

During the camp, the youth explored a variety of concepts and topics. To start, youth learned the different roles of the *Koskala* (young man) and *Koskalaka Win* (young woman). Mentors and campers reviewed kinship terms in Lakota to know and recognize relatives in the community. Cultural mentors also provided many cultural, spiritual, and traditional experiences for the youth to take part in, instilling history and connections within the youth. These activities all promoted how to be a good relative and instill pride in the youth.

Many lessons were taught throughout the course of camp, such as the *Pte San Win* story. The overarching lessons of the story included: 1) sexual assault is against the natural law, 2) even a thought is damaging, and 3) thoughts become action. Other lessons included discussions about issues rarely addressed as young teens, including knowing body parts and their purposes. Sessions on anatomy were also taught, where the young girls met in the back of the tipis with elder women, and the young men met in a separate tipi. A session on teen dating violence occurred after the anatomy lesson. Mentors and youth talked about red flags, gas lighting, and looking for signs before entering a relationship.

Other activities presented during the camps included teaching the youth how to set up the tipis, how to play hand games, gathering healing plants, archery practice, and playing lacrosse. All activities served a purpose and lesson for youth to take with them when the camps ended.

## OUTCOMES

Norma and her team noticed many successes of the camps, either through observing youth or listening to feedback. Positive feedback was received throughout the many activities of the camps. Youth enjoyed praying together in their own language and cultural ways, the young men and women demonstrated honoring each other in various ways, and youth told stories from their families surrounding empowerment. Youth began applying lessons while still at camp, such as reminding each other to feed their relatives during mealtimes. Norma and colleagues also noted both the boys and girls were very receptive to the anatomy discussions.

At the end of the camp, youth set goals for the year. All the youth included more cultural activities and to be a good relative in their goals. At the end of the camp, some youth even asked if they could have at least one more day at the camp. Youth were also provided resources to take home to learn about the boarding school experience and how to learn to communicate and share stories with trusted individuals.

## LESSONS LEARNED & NEXT STEPS

Throughout the camps, the team was able to determine which lessons, discussions, and activities should continue in future camps and which could be modified. Overall, the feedback was very positive from the camp, and the high interest of youth wanting to attend the camps shows a need for education and learning to continue. To accommodate more youth and continue teaching important practices, Norma and her team are currently in the process of planning another solstice camp for December 2023.

For more information on **Solstice Camp Opportunities**, please contact  
**Tanya Grassel-Kreitlow**, FAST Coordinator, at 605-731-0041 or [tanya@sdnafvsa.com](mailto:tanya@sdnafvsa.com)

For more information on **RPE Programming**, please contact  
**Sarah Barclay**, Adolescent Health Coordinator, at 605-367-5212 or [sarah.barclay@state.sd.us](mailto:sarah.barclay@state.sd.us).

