Sioux YMCA Cultural Guide for Volunteers

Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe Reservation

605-365-5232

Cultural Differences

One of the biggest hurdles for volunteers to overcome is learning to appreciate cultural differences. Functioning in a new culture can initially be very difficult but education and seeking understanding makes the transition much easier.

Introductions & Eye Contact

Don't expect formal introductions; just give a quiet and friendly smile. You don't have to be pushy for people to get to know you. Handshakes, generally, are not firm. Don't be surprised if people don't make eye contact when talking to you. Culturally speaking eye contact is considered rude.

Relationships & Interactions

Parents and children may not live together, be sensitive to that. More often than not, a child will live with their extended family rather than their nuclear family. If a man and woman are seen together it may be construed that they are married or "going together". Don't be surprised if adults/ older youth of opposite genders don't interact directly - it makes many Lakota men and women uncomfortable to interact with people of the opposite sex if they aren't related.

Saying "No Thank You"

There's no Lakota word for "no thank you". Additionally any type of confrontation may make Native youth and adults uncomfortable. As a result, if you ask a youth/adult a question they will most likely say "yes" even if they don't want to do it. When asking someone to do something for you/for Sioux YMCA make sure to give them an easy out, just in case!

Being Nosey

Non-natives are often misconstrued as being nosey because they ask a lot of personal questions. To avoid this, don't ask too many personal questions about people you don't know or have just met.

Rumors

Rumors arise in small communities. Avoid getting involved with petty fights and community rumors - it will make life a lot easier.

Cultural Differences

Living in a Fishbowl

The communities you're working in are small. You will be very visible no matter what, and people will always be observing you. Embrace it.

Animals

While dogs are a sacred animal to the Lakota people, pets are treated much differently on the reservation than off. As you will notice, animals roam free here and may not be allowed in the house. There are always puppies around because dogs are often not spayed or neutered. While most dogs are harmless, be aware. If you run into issues with a dog, notify call the Tribal Game, Fish, and Parks Program (605-964-7812).

Rural Living

The reservation is rural and isolated and thus has many differences from more metropolitan areas. For example, hitchhiking is fairly common. Land lines are prevalent. The kids aren't tied to technology (yet).

Culture of Sharing

The Lakota may view material possessions differently than you. The traditional Lakota society was communal and it was necessary to rely on friends and family for survival. You will see kids sharing a lot of things, especially toys, food, and bikes. You may see bikes just thrown on the side of the road awaiting their "true" owner. Because ownership is not assigned to material possessions, be careful with leaving your phone around. It is a good idea to put a pass lock on your phone.

Joking Culture

The Lakota culture is a joking/mocking culture. Play along and you will fit right in.

Family

You will often hear people talking about how they are related to other people. Though they may be distantly related, a lot of family may still live on the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe Reservation. Because you may never know who is related to whom, be careful who you gossip with and about. Additionally, it is not uncommon to have extended family or multiple families living under one roof. Oftentimes, a teen or tween child may act as the head of their household. Because of this, some kids may have issues with authority. You may notice that parents may be less involved with their children's lives. Children are raised to be independent.

Cultural Differences

The Y is a Special Place

The Sioux YMCA and its employees are highly respected in the reservation communities. The YMCA acts as a second home for the kids. Relationships are very important in Lakota culture. Name dropping the Sioux YMCA or any of its employees may give you an "in".

Rough Play

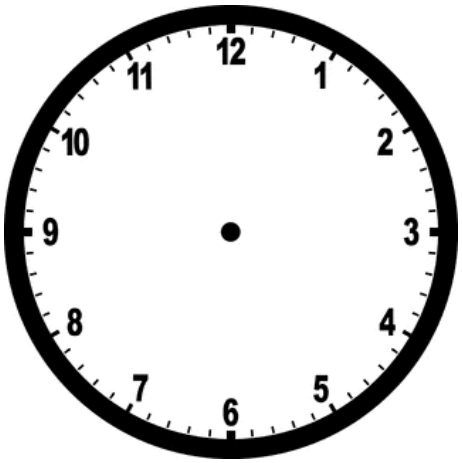
The kids here may play more roughly than you're used to. They will play more physically, which is allowed to an extent.

Hitchhiking

You may see hitchhikers on the road. Hitchhiking is fairly common on the reservation as gas money is hard to come by for many. People here are less hesitant to pick up hitchhikers than you may be used to, but do not feel obligated to pick up hitchhikers.

Indian Time

You may find that members of the community are always "late" or take their time getting things done. Indian time is a stereotype that has roots in tradition. Kelly Gibson speaks on their experience with Indian time:

> "When I began living and working in Indian country, I learned the origin of the phrase 'Indian Time.' I came to understand that traditionally Indian people were very good students of nature. They studied the seasons and the animals to learn how to live well in their environments. Given this, they learned that it's important to be patient and to act when circumstances did not support them. I have come to understand it's a Western idea that we can control most circumstances and that we should run our lives by the clock and calendar. The control we think we have over circumstances is frequently an illusion and can lead to a lot of wasted energy. Much can be gained by watching, listening, waiting and then acting when the time is right. 'Indian time' is really about respecting the 'timeliness' of an action. It makes more sense to plant crops when the weather is right than when the calendar says it is time. What a mistake it would be to take this traditional concept of timeliness and develop a misperception that contemporary Indian people are frequently late. I am one of the few non-Indian people working in my office and if someone is running late for a meeting, it's usually me."

--From *Stereotypes: "Indian Time"* http://blog.nrcprograms.org/my-thoughts-on-stereotypes/