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Inmate group champions Indian customs

In trying to change lives, the Native American Council of Tribes also stretches its influence outside of prison

Byline: Jonnie Taté Walker

"Something good in a bad place."

Robert Horse was 19 years old when he built his first sweat lodge for a Lakota inipi ceremony.

He watched as the willow poles were pulled and stretched in such a way that an eight-point star formed at the top of the lodge before it was covered with canvas and tarp.

"Some people think you just put the poles in the ground and bunch them up and you're done," said Horse, affiliated with the Oglala Sioux Tribe and now 29. "But there's a certain way to do it; the way our ancestors did it."

His first lodge, and all the lodges Horse helps to rebuild every spring, are located inside the tall barbed-wire fences of the South Dakota State Penitentiary, otherwise known as the Hill.

Now the president of the Native American Council of Tribes Inc., Horse teaches inmates new to Lakota traditions and ceremonies how to build a sweat lodge, how to make prayer flags and tobacco ties, and how to pray in a language struggling to survive.

"Back home on the rez there was lots of ceremonies and sweats going on, but youth aren't educated on what was really going on or why," Horse said in one of several phone interviews from the Hill.

Horse thinks this lack of culture and knowledge of Lakota ways is a major reason Native Americans account for a disproportionately high percentage of prison inmates in South Dakota: 29 percent for adults, according to the 2012 annual report from the Department of Corrections.

This keeps Horse, his executive board and other members motivated to make NACT what one prison official calls the most active religious and advocacy group on the Hill. But it's the group's efforts reaching outside the walls that make it a unique rehabilitation and educational tool, Horse said.

On Friday, NACT will sponsor a community gathering and feed honoring Kimberly Rose Means, an 11-year-old Pine Ridge girl killed in 1981 while participating in efforts to support the religious rights of Native American inmates, as well as Lyle Eagle Tail and Madison Wallace, who died March 14 in a heroic effort to save Wallace's younger brother from drowning at Falls Park.

This will be NACT's first time sponsoring such an event outside the prison walls, and it's being organized by statewide groups and local NACT supporters. However, the group created and has overseen the Kimberly Rose Means scholarship since 1987, awarded annually through an endowment from the Sioux Falls Area Community Foundation. In addition, NACT members and non-Native inmates participate in an annual relay in memory of Kimberly Rose Means.

"It's not always easy to do something good in a bad place," said Cody DeSersa, NACT's secretary. "But there's a big payoff when you see the good it does for the brothers in here and for families outside."

Establishing freedoms

Native American inmates haven't always had the freedom to practice their spirituality and perform ceremonies on the Hill. Long hair was cut, medicine bags were banned and the sacred pipe - akin to a Bible - was not allowed inside the walls.

"There was a time when the state did not allow the Native American Indian inmates to practice the religion of their choice," said Rosebud Sioux tribal member Roscoe Primeaux in a letter written from prison. Primeaux is 32 years into serving a life sentence and remembers the early years of NACT. "It was taboo to even think of an Indian doing his ceremonies since the more common religious activity was only Christian."

That all changed in the '70s.

In 1972, Native American inmates were part of a lawsuit filed in U.S. District Court - *Crowe v. Erickson* - requesting access and money to pay for medicine men, ceremonies, cultural classes and spiritual paraphernalia, among other civil rights. In May 1977, the state agreed, even allowing furloughs for inmates seeking participation in sundances on their reservations.

A year later, the federal government passed the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978, which established protections to preserve the traditional religious rights and cultural practices of Native Americans. These rights include, but aren't limited to, access to sacred sites, use and possession of objects considered sacred and freedom to worship through ceremonial and traditional rites, including within prisons.

"That is how NACT Inc. came into existence, and a sacred sweat lodge was constructed inside the South Dakota State Penitentiary," Primeaux recalled. "And we were allowed our sacred pipe of peace."

Five executive board members, including a group pipe carrier, and seven council members serve as NACT's elected officials who meet once a month. Anyone can participate in the quarterly meetings, and Horse said NACT considers all of the prison's 180-some Native American inmates as group members, even if they don't participate regularly.

Through the years, a few privileges have been removed, including the sundance furloughs, because some inmates were abusing their time away from prison, Primeaux said. The state also discontinued funding religious activities as more faith groups were established inside the walls.

NACT and two Native American plaintiffs filed suit after the state issued a blanket ban of tobacco in Department of Corrections facilities in 2000, including tobacco used in tribal ceremonies. NACT recently won the case, and Native American inmates are allowed to use mixtures that include 1 percent of tobacco to be smoked in the sacred pipe or used for tobacco ties and prayer.

In addition, NACT members and other Native American inmates on the Hill continue to enjoy access to

spiritual leaders, can participate in the inipi ceremony and host wacipi celebrations, or powwows, among other religious freedoms.

"It's important to have groups created inside prisons working together for positive reasons," said Hope Johnson, who oversees cultural and religious programming as the corrections program and contracts manager for the penitentiary. "Inmates don't often have positive people to associate with, and this gives them the opportunity to create good while incarcerated."

Johnson thinks NACT, which was established in 1976 as one of the first Native American religious groups in the country, is the most active of the prison's eight religious groups.

"For me, it's powerful to watch these inmates find a reason to change," Johnson said.

Practices at prison

Built next to the prison's recreation yard is the NACT sweat lodge. It's big enough to hold about 30 worshippers and is used for an inipi ceremony twice a week during recreation time. The lodge, including the patch of earth surrounding it, sits on land comparable in size to its Christian chapel counterpart inside the prison.

Twenty-two-year-old Lucas Waugh, a Rosebud Sioux tribal member serving a 25-year prison sentence, participates in the inipi ceremony and is one of NACT's youngest members.

"I sweat every week," Waugh said during a recent roundtable interview at the prison with NACT members. "It clears my mind. It helps me be better. It lets me pray for the people who are suffering."

This past month, Waugh signed on to run the prison relay race in honor of Kimberly Rose Means. NACT organizes the noncompetitive race annually at the prison beginning in early May and draws about two dozen inmates - Native and non-Native - to participate.

The inmates track their laps - four-and-a-half laps to a mile - and will tally up the total on Friday. The goal is 350 miles, the distance between Rapid City and Sioux Falls, to symbolize support for Native American inmates across the state.

Running alongside and sometimes himself holding the NACT eagle staff, Waugh laps the outer rim of the prison yard four miles a day. He and other NACT members will pass the staff to community members Friday, when it will be taken to Falls Park for the memorial gathering and feed.

"It's an honor for me to run for a reason, for a purpose," Waugh said. "I had no purpose before I came in here. That wasn't me before. This is the true me now."

Growth, maturity

Mary Montoya was introduced to NACT 20 years ago when, as a CPA, she volunteered to help the group apply for its 501(c)3 nonprofit status.

Today, she is the prison chapel volunteer for Native Americans, or NACT's "hands and feet," she said with a smile. Among other duties, Montoya helps the group gather donations for the sweat lodge and prayer and coordinates correspondence between NACT and the public.

"I was a volunteer at the county jail for three years, and it always amazed me how interested and eager men were to get to the prison so they could learn the Native ways," Montoya said.

In her 20 years of volunteering with NACT, Montoya has noticed more - and younger - inmates participating in the group.

"When you see them growing and maturing, when they start accepting responsibility along with their culture and religion, that's a great feeling as a volunteer," Montoya said.

Horse, who has chaired NACT twice in the 14 years he's been in prison, is proud of the work his group accomplishes.

"I wish I could say we all had a better beginning," said Horse, who was 16 when he was handed a life sentence that was reversed in 2002 when the South Dakota Supreme Court said law enforcement questioned Horse illegally without parental notice or consent. He now is serving a 40-year prison term.

"I have to deal with what I did every second of the day. I am reminded about what I did every second of the day. I'm going to repay all my life through service to the people," said Horse, who crafts pieces of Lakota beadwork in his spare time. "How we got here, we're not proud of that. But we're able to make a difference now with the time we have left."

Horse, in particular, is credited by many members of NACT for his passion in keeping the group active and focused. He spends hours typing letters and agendas and newsletters for NACT, coordinates speakers for the group's spiritual conferences and ensures that his board is doing good work in the prison.

"In these positions, our behavior is watched closely by the other inmates," said DeSersa, who is serving a 15-year sentence. "That alone helps keep me out of trouble, because you never want to disrespect the board."

DeSersa, an enrolled member of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe, stays on point by tutoring inmates in GED coursework, showing others how to make traditional regalia and encouraging new inmates to seek spiritual guidance through NACT.

"Men are able to learn and grow here," DeSersa said. "Even me. I've become more aware of my culture and spirituality through my involvement with NACT. It gives me a chance to be 38 - now almost 39 - years old, and not thinking I'm 22 years old like I used to act."

Back in society

Drinking and drugs landed Gary Weddell in the prison system when he was 17 years old back in 1973. He served what he called three tours on the Hill, his last stint from 1984 to 1998.

"Young people - sometimes we think we know everything when we're young," said the Yankton Sioux man, now 57 of Sioux Falls, who credits NACT and family support with his success both in and outside the walls. "When I went in the third time, I was really focused on the culture, and I had a daughter I needed to change for."

Johnson said this is why groups like NACT are supported and encouraged by prison officials.

"Our goal is to rehabilitate, and see inmates be better people," Johnson said of the activities NACT and other religious groups organize. "It's our job to provide inmates opportunities so they may continue growing while

in the community. What they learn here can help them face challenges on the outside."

Weddell recalled NACT's creation and evolution through the years, describing it as a living entity and a savior to struggling Native American inmates. He remains an active NACT supporter and is helping to organize the community gathering at Falls Park by collecting donations of food and lining up speakers for the event.

"When you step into the sweat lodge for the first time, there's an understanding that you can be reborn right there, that you go into that sweat and pray and believe," said Weddell, whose early years were spent in an abusive boarding school atmosphere.

"I didn't know anything about sweat lodges or sacred pipes growing up," he said. "... That's the same for a lot of Indian guys going to prison. We don't know the good way to live and pray. For me, (NACT) gave me life. I would probably be dead now if it weren't for them and what I learned from them spiritually."

Reach freelance reporter Jonnie Taté Walker at jtatewalker@gmail.com.

"Something good in a bad place."

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Find a gallery of Native American Council of Tribes photos at the prison.

About NACT

The Native American Council of Tribes Inc. is a 501(c)3 nonprofit operating out of the South Dakota State Penitentiary in Sioux Falls. It provides religious, cultural and educational opportunities to inmates and the public. It depends on monetary and in-kind donations to complete its outreach and spiritual efforts.

NACT is in need of items related to the inipi ceremony. Sage bundles, firewood and large rocks are of particular importance; however, donations of cedar, sweet grass, buffalo meat, bitterroot, red willow and bear root are also appreciated.

For information on making an in-kind or cash donation, contact NACT volunteer Mary Montoya at 605-332-0147.

If you go

What: A free community gathering and feed will take place to honor the lives and sacrifices of Kimberly Rose Means, Lyle Eagle Tail and Madison Wallace. The gathering is sponsored by the Mankato Memorial Riders and the Native American Council of Tribes.

When: 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Friday.

Where: Falls Park.

Cost: Free.

About the Kimberly Rose Means Scholarship

This scholarship benefits graduating high school seniors who are enrolled members of a South Dakota Native American tribe or South Dakota tribal members who are returning to school after an absence. Applicants must:

Plan to attend an accredited college, university or vocational school

Have a cumulative GPA of 2.0 or higher

Have participated in school and community activities (only applies to high school seniors)

Have the desire and ability to accomplish his or her goals

Award: \$500

Deadline: March

From the Sioux Falls Area Community Foundation, www.sfacf.org

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Marlon Little Bald Eagle, spiritual leader for the Native American Council of Tribes at the South Dakota sweat lodge, and red road of recovery are located near the recreation grounds of the prison.

Art caption: Cdy DeSersa, secretary of the Native American Council of Tribes, talks about beadwork May 24 at the S Pickthorn / Argus Leader

Mary Montoya is the prison chapel volunteer for Native Americans at the South Dakota State Penitentiary. Hope Johnson is the corrections program and contracts manager at the prison.

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