



Reflections

By Maranda Garrett

A year ago, while preparing for the Healthy Traditions Youth Leadership Camp, I drew on my previous experience in leadership roles and recalled those whom I looked up to and respected when I was the same age as our youth attending the trip. The most impactful leaders in my life were those who led by example and believed in me despite my detrimental decisions.

Today, empathy and vulnerability are two hallmark characteristics of good leadership for me. Understanding where one is coming from and being able to share one's own hardships provides the important foundation necessary to connect with others and exemplify what makes someone a strong leader.

But how do you exemplify such characteristics when leading a group of teenagers who come from traumatic histories, some who are struggling with the same detrimental decisions I once grappled with? Who, like me at that age, are rebellious and strong-headed. It takes a lot of patience and love to sit with these difficult emotions and provide a space where youth can feel safe to work through them.

Fortunately, not only have we inherited the trauma of our ancestors, we also have within us the resilience they built through their hardships. It is with that inherited resilience that our people are strong today and it is through connection with our ancestral traditions that we may strengthen that resilience and our identities.

I have always identified as Native American. I grew up on the reservation, attending Culture Camp and pow-wow. When I was a young girl I helped care for my great grandmother, Gladys Muschamp. Caring for and respecting elders and learning our cultural traditions were the experiences that rooted me in my Native identity as a young girl.

But then you step out into modern society and when you self-identify as Native American the response is, "Well, you don't look Native." And your self-identity is challenged. You begin to think about, "What does being Native look like today?" and "Am I a good Native?" This questioning of my self-identity was world-splintering and made me feel lost.

However, it is also this questioning that allowed me to reflect a little more deeply on what it means to be Native American. It was this vulnerable space that provided me yet another experience with which I could connect with others. As a 24-year-old feeling in limbo between society's perception of me and who I actually am, I cried when other youth shared with me the same identity struggle.

The Youth Leadership Camp had an impact on both the youth and the chaperones. Being in community with each other, practicing traditional ceremonies, tending to our traditional foods and hearing the wisdom of Grandma Aggie was truly life-changing.

While youth did develop valuable leadership skills like leading a prayer or starting a discussion, developing self-awareness and building relationships, they also experienced a spiritual healing. A healing that transcends the span of our lives. One which reaches deep in time and also heals the spirits of our ancestors.

That first day at Vesper Meadow, standing in the valley through which Dead Indian Creek runs, as we gathered gus seeds I looked to the ridge that held the headwaters of the creek and as the wind blew through I could hear the songs of our ancestors who were once stewards of that same land. Tears started streaming down my face and for the first time in my life I had found that which rooted me more strongly in my identity than anything else.

For me, it is connecting to our Mother Earth and caring for her that makes me feel most grounded in my Native identity, find healing from my ancestral traumas and strengthens my indigenous resilience.

If I had had this same experience as a youth, would I have understood the significance of it? Would I have found the same spiritual healing and strengthening of my Indigenous identity? I cannot say for sure. I do pray that the youth who had the opportunity to experience this trip did walk away with deeper roots in their Native identity. I pray that they continue to grow and strengthen those roots so they may find healing from their traumas, peace with their identities and purpose in this world.

I saw parts of myself as a young woman in the youth who attended the trip. The trauma and the resilience. The pain and the joy. The struggle to feel rooted in a Native identity within a modern society that was not built with room for us. There was healing on this trip, something I hope can be provided to many more generations of youth to come.