

From a YMCA in One of America's Richest Places to a Y in One of the Poorest

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Article and photos provided by the [Darien YMCA](#):

Darien residents Jake Greene and Liz Morrissey never thought they would spend two weeks living on an Indian reservation in the middle of the rolling prairies of South Dakota, until they joined the Darien YMCA's partner, the Sioux YMCA, in the Sioux YMCA Initiative this spring.

The Sioux YMCA Initiative began 9 years ago as a way to provide day camp-type programming for the children living in various communities on the reservation. For 12 weeks each summer, the Twin Cities YMCA coordinates the Y staff who journey to the reservation and conduct programming.

The immersion provides Y staff with an understanding of cultural and socio-economic realities they have

little previous experience with. The priority is community development, with focus on the youth.

Liz and Jake arrived on the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe Reservation on Saturday, May 23, after driving 8 hours from Minneapolis, where they received 2 days of immersion training and were assigned to Team 1: Courage with a third teammate, Jess Krueger from the Andover Y in the Twin Cities.

“The welcome we received, both from the kids in the communities and the Sioux Y staff and board members, was incredible,” Jake said.

Each day was spent driving miles on the hard packed gravel roads out to the various communities, which included Cherry Creek, Bear Creek, Swiftbird, White Horse and Thunder Butte.

Once Team 1 arrived in a community, they would round up whoever wanted to play that day and settle in for a couple hours of fun. “The three B’s: bubbles, basketball, and bracelets were the key,” said Liz, adding that “The kids were excited to have people who were there just to play with them, and we were there to make them happy.”

“There were definitely some moments that were challenging, like when kids would come out to play barefoot, even when there was broken glass and other litter on the ground,” Greene explained, adding that “It’s a different way of life on the reservation, and they lack many of the resources that we take for granted.”

The Sioux YMCA, housed in a small 2,500 sq. ft. building, currently services an area over 5,000 sq. miles, roughly the size of Connecticut, which includes 18 communities.

Unfortunately the Sioux Y, which runs entirely off of donations and grants, is not fully equipped to deal with the stark disparities that face its communities, one of the poorest areas in the United States.

“We were so excited to be able to extend the work of the Sioux Y, especially after seeing the respect the Y has in the community because of all of the amazing work they do,” said Morrissey.

When asked about the most rewarding part of the trip, Liz said, “Hands down it was our last time visiting White Horse. All of the kids who had been coming out to play were waiting for us on the playground. They were running to the van before we had even parked!” Morrissey said, laughing.

“We all felt a real sense of achievement, and knew we had made an impact on the kid’s lives, even for the two short weeks we were there.”

For more information about the Darien YMCA visit darien-ymca.org. For more information about the Sioux YMCA Initiative visit www.sioxymca.org.