

My own first-hand visit to South Dakota and the Cheyenne Sioux Reservation

By Cheri Choy

Up until last June, I had no idea about the YMCA movement with the Sioux YMCA in South Dakota. We had a guest speaker at a meeting of the Marston Chapter who was the CEO of the Sioux Y and a thought came to me: I was flying 1-way to New York City on the 4th of July and driving my daughter's car back to California and I had planned a route through the Great Lakes and Northern Plains...maybe I can plan my route to actually VISIT the Sioux Y.

Google maps had estimated a five hour 347 mile westbound drive from Sioux Falls to Rapid City, South Dakota on day six of my 15 state/11 day solo journey. To reach Dupree, S.D., a sparsely populated bleep on the map, it required a detour adding another four to five hours to my trip.

With my stop over, I was able to meet and chat with CEO Andrew Corley and most of his staff team, tour the modest facilities: a log cabin office (built by volunteers) and a larger modern program building with a bunk house and commercial kitchen. The Sioux was providing free and reduced price meals taking a delivery the day I visited:

With my guitar in tow, I led the after school kids in some camp songs (*once a Y Camp Director, always a Y Camp Director*).

To say that I was deeply moved and inspired by this visit is an understatement. I'll briefly share a few feelings and insights with my encounters with the Sioux YMCA...

Home-grown leaders: Young-30-something-YMCA CEO Andrew Corley, a native Bostonian, grew up as a kid at YMCA Camp: C.I.T. Ragger, etc. Like many of us, he joined the YMCA movement, became a "lifer" and shares his passion with a community with high needs. It warms my heart to know that the Y continues to grow its own future leaders as it had for many of us.

No way to be self-sustaining: Unlike large urban Y's like San Diego that has a strong economy, Fortune 500 corporations, and the best talent on staff and volunteers. Viejas or Sycuan in Dakota? No casinos at least not in this part of the State/Region—not enough population. This area of South Dakota is desolate. No stores, no services, no jobs...and lots of poverty and government assistance. The only way for the Sioux YMCA to survive is through help from the outside...like YMCA Alumni.

YMCA serving ethnic and disadvantaged communities: Much of my career, both inside and outside the YMA saw me in communities serving people of color and/or challenged by the cycle of poverty. In our careers, we often used the phrase “Robin Hood-taking from the Rich and giving to the poor”. It happened this way when I ran the Copley Family YMCA, the Chinatown-San Francisco and the Shi Yu Lang Central YMCA-Tenderloin in San Francisco.

Fast forward, things happened fast: Just before Thanksgiving, Victor recruited Jeanne to chair a fundraising campaign, Jeanne recruits me to be a campaigner and to take on her seat as V.P. of Membership for Marston Chapter. I was proud to join the team of Sam Wurtzbacher, Bea Halk, Jeanne Schmelzer, Victor Botello, Debby Lenz and Steve Rowe as we browsed the chapter roster, made assignments and even added names of friends who would be invited to give. We ask you to join us in making a gift to the YMCA Alumni National Service Project.

The National Service Project has inspired me. To top it off, I have just signed up for the very first construction crew in May 2022. I plan to drive my RV travel trailer there. If you want to join me or carpool, it will be a grand adventure!