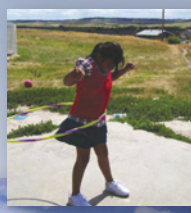
God makes everyone differently:

Bringing hope to the Lakota

BY MARCY GREENWADE, CLASS OF 2010

Minda Cox (center) with Lakota children.



Minda Cox, class of 2012, was set to leave on July 4, 2010. Her bags were packed, her wheelchair charged and her bottled water and nonperishable food were stored in the car. The phone rang just a few days before her departure date, and the news delivered discouraged her. "Three more deaths," the voice on the line told Cathy Cox, Minda's mother. "We'll have to push back Minda's departure from the fourth to the sixth. The tribe will be mourning the loss of their children, and we must not interfere."

Minda knew that the Lakota people of the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation struggled, especially the children, but she had not yet fully understood the pain and suffering they were enduring until she learned of the teenage suicides that pushed back her arrival.

After hearing the news, Minda, who was born without arms or legs, vowed to do all she could physically, spiritually, and mentally to help the Lakota people.

The 15-hour drive was a long one. When Minda finally arrived, the beauty of the land consumed her. She sat outside the unfinished Dream Center admiring the miles of Badlands that stretched to the horizon.

The Dream Center is owned by Wings as Eagles Ministries (WAEM) and led by Pastor Lori McAfee. Through WAEM, Minda was able to arrange a three-week mission trip to South Dakota to volunteer at the Center. The trip served as her initial required mission before pursuing six months abroad for SBU's Intercultural Studies (ICS) program directed by Dr. Jim Frost.

Minda's main objective was to understand the Lakota people's culture, history and spiritual beliefs while sharing her life with the people, serving God, and journaling each day's experiences.

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Day 1:

Minda writes, *"After resting and meeting members of the other volunteer groups, I feel excited and anxious. I'm not sure what to expect for our journey into the small towns on the rez (reservation,) but I'm ready to take any challenge that comes my way. I pray to the Father that I may be an encouragement in not only my words but in my actions as well."*

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Pastor Lori took a handful of the volunteers to Wounded Knee. The community is poor and in serious need of job opportunities and community development. One of the team members described her feelings when she arrived as, "walking into a poverty-stricken country, not the United States." In fact, according to the 2000 census, 61% of the individuals on the reservation are living below poverty level.

Each of the battered homes was awash in graffiti from the 18 gangs that roam the reservation. The black, white, and blue spray paint that covered the homes and the decaying propane tanks reminded the volunteers of the danger of each gang's presence. But it was not the spray paint, the mangled piles of clothing and trash or even the drunk men scattered about that caught Minda's attention, it was the children.

The beautiful, helpless children who were caught in the middle of the gangs, alcoholism, drugs, and sexual and mental abuse were the only ones upon whom Minda could focus. Many wore dirty clothes; others had no shoes. Some sported short hair that bore

Each year Director of University Ministries Kurt Caddy takes a team to Wings as Eagles Ministries for a mission trip that is sponsored through Southwest Baptist University. For more information, please call 417.328.1902.

silent testimony to lice infestation. But no matter how great the parents' anxiety or the grandmothers' care, the children seemed to be at the mercy of the violence and despair that surrounded them. For many, the only way out was death.

Most of the Lakota children reacted similarly when they first saw Minda. The groups of volunteers would travel into the community, honking the horns on their vehicles, and kids would come running from houses all across the neighborhood. As soon as one of the young adult volunteers opened the car door, the native children would cling to him or her. But with Minda, their initial reaction was shyness or fear. The sight of someone so different caused them to avoid her, but eventually, their curiosity overcame their hesitation. "What happened to you, Minda?" some of the children would ask. "I was born this way," Minda would say. "God makes everyone differently."

"You have the choice to follow and trust in God just like I did. He is in control of everything, and he will not lead you astray."

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Day 12:

"I got to speak to the children today. It was cool for me because only a few of the kids were uncomfortable with my disability. It's like it's normal [to them]. They have seen so much in their own lives that this just seems like another thing, another sadness perhaps. I want them to know that God loves them for who they are. They don't have to change themselves to please Him. If they trust Him, He can change the struggles of their lives and turn them into something good. He did it for me."

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Cole, a young Lakota boy who recently lost his best friend to suicide, wheeled Minda to the middle of the outdoor concrete basketball court at Evergreen, a small community on Pine Ridge. Missionaries and Lakota kids gathered onto the court and formed a circle around her.

As Minda began to speak, everyone fell silent. "I was born in India, and because I had no arms or legs, my parents knew that they would not be able to take proper care of me. The hospital placed me in an orphanage, and I was adopted into a multicultural Christian family and taken back to the United States. It was hard for me growing up, and I felt that I was always noticed for my disability. Other kids could do things I couldn't, and it made me more aware of my handicap."

"I always felt like I had to explain myself. I felt rejected. I struggled because there was so much that I wanted to do but couldn't. Though my life was difficult, I had God on my side. When I felt sad, I would pray. I knew that I could either let my disability define me, or I could overcome it. It was hard to see my disability as a gift from God, but ultimately I knew that it was. It gives me the opportunity to say that God has made my life beautiful.

"I chose to place my trust in God and overcome my circumstances. He helped me discover my talent and love for art. He brought me to Southwest Baptist University and has helped me to do everything I need to do. I want you each to know that God can be trusted, that God loves you, and though bad things may happen to you, good things will also come.

"You have the choice to follow and trust in God just like I did. He is in control of everything, and he will not lead you astray."

A Lakota girl walked over to Minda and hugged her. "Thank you," the teenager simply said.

Author's Note:

Marcy Greenwade (center) with Lakota children.

I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to travel with Minda on the mission trip to Pine Ridge.

It began in the most ironic way, but it seems that the best things in life are never planned or typical. I met Minda through my communications internship at SBU. We traveled to Jefferson City to lobby against changes to Access Missouri, a financial assistance program for undergraduates. A few months after our trip, I saw Minda in the Jester Learning and Performing Arts Center on campus. Though we were always courteous, neither one of us was well-acquainted with the other. Minda stopped her wheelchair and told me that she needed to talk to me. I was a bit surprised, but I agreed.

"I'm going on a mission trip this summer, and I've really been praying about what I should do," Minda said. "I need someone to travel with me, and I would love if you could come. I just feel it could be a great experience for both of us."

Although I normally consider myself to be a control freak who finds it necessary to uncover every detail before making a decision, for some reason, I did not think about where I would be going, who I would be helping, or even when I would be arriving. I replied with a simple, "Yes, I'd love to."

After saying our goodbyes and with Minda promising to fill me in on the details, I plopped down on one of the couches in Jester. What did I just agree to? Why was I so excited for something that I did not have a clue about? I would later chalk it up to God's grace and perhaps his humor.

I had never been on a mission trip before. When Minda told me where we were going and to whom we would be ministering, I was terrified. The trip seemed dangerous, and in all honesty, I consider myself to be a bit high maintenance and selfish. Could I sleep in the outdoors, help to take care of someone other than myself, and really share the gospel with children?

Once I arrived at the Dream Center, my doubts began to fade. Being around Minda is like a breath of fresh air. She is genuine and honest. The things that she achieves on a day-to-day basis are a constant motivation to those around her. Her outlook on life is contagious. I found myself striving to be better physically, emotionally, and mentally. She has that affect on people, and the most amazing part is that she is completely unaware how her actions inspire others. Minda does not see herself as anything special or extraordinary. She just sees herself as a child of God.

Though Minda and I participated in the same mission, we had very different experiences. I struggled with patience, humility and fear, but I learned more about myself in a few weeks than I ever thought possible. The Lakota people showed me the importance of taking time to appreciate even the smallest blessings, while Minda taught me that God calls people from every realm of life to serve Him. She once said, "God wants all kinds of people to serve Him in His kingdom. You don't have to be a certain kind of person to help others or follow the Lord for his sake. My wheelchair will never interfere with God's ability to use me, of that I am sure."

Thank you, Minda. Thank you for teaching me the power of God's love.