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Griz arrests tied to drug-related robbery (7990)
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CHAD DUNDAS: Griz arrests shock, anger community (2489)
Football rules in town once known for hoops (2457)
Mountain lion attacks hunter near Kalispell (2024)
Montana among nation's most vain, say license plates
Posted on November 11 (1714)

Regional News

Native speakers bring lessons of history, discrimination to C.S. Porter students

By ROB CHANEY of the Missoulian



Kathy Little Leaf discusses the effects of Indian boarding school on generations of Natives.
Photo by ROB CHANEY/Missoulian

Sixth-graders have all kinds of reasons not to like school. But they'd have to be mighty miserable to top Kathy Little Leaf's story.

The kids in Maeta Kaplan's C.S. Porter Middle School social studies class had been reading Native American stories when Kaplan learned some of them had family history connections to the notorious Indian boarding school system. On Friday, Little Leaf and Glenda Weasel came to share their photos and tales.

Little Leaf described herself as a "descendent of the residential school era." While she didn't attend one herself, her mother, her father and his father all did. That cumulative experience still echoes in her life and that of her children.

Before a rapt room of sixth-graders, Little Leaf recounted the tales her mother told her about being sent 50 miles away at the age of 5. How families were segregated by age, and all traces of tribal heritage were shorn away. She particularly concentrated on the requirement to learn English, because anyone who was caught speaking his or her native language was soundly punished.

Despite the frustration and fear the boarding schools instilled, Little Leaf said successive generations of Native parents sent their children to the same experience. Part of that was economic - life was too harsh on the home reservations.

"My grandfather's thinking was that this was the way for children," Little Leaf said. "He told my mother: 'We're struggling and I can't take care of you.' Imagine a 5-year-old hearing that. "

While Little Leaf's mother retained her Blackfeet language, she accepted the boarding school's teaching that native languages were of no use in the modern world.

"So where the language was lost was with me," Little Leaf said. "She said there was no reason to teach us."

The harsh conditions also influenced how the families treated their children, Little Leaf said.

"My mother said she did not receive hugs or appreciation for her achievements," she said. "No one ever told her, 'I love you.' If you're not being told those things, it starts to become normal. So when I became a parent, I had to teach myself to tell my daughter, 'I love you.' "

At 29, Little Leaf said she finally realized the anger she felt inside was reflecting the resentment her mother felt for the boarding school system. Between the requirements to make beds with hospital corners and the loss of years of time, she could have been learning about her own culture and traditions.

Weasel's family also attended boarding schools for several generations. She did, too, although under much different circumstances. When she enrolled, the tribal government had taken over management and abolished most of the assimilation requirements.


Kaplan said her students were working up an understanding of how governments made rules for operating schools. On a more personal level, the boarding school stories played into Porter's anti-bullying campaign. Kaplan told her students there was no difference between a teacher abusing power in a classroom and a bully doing so on a playground.

It prompted kids like Adrienne Efta-Dixon to wonder just why people had to be so mean.

"That's what we want," Kaplan replied. "We want to raise students who ask questions like 'why?' When they see people discriminating against other people, they should wonder: 'Why should that happen?' "

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