Unanswered questions: My month on a reservation

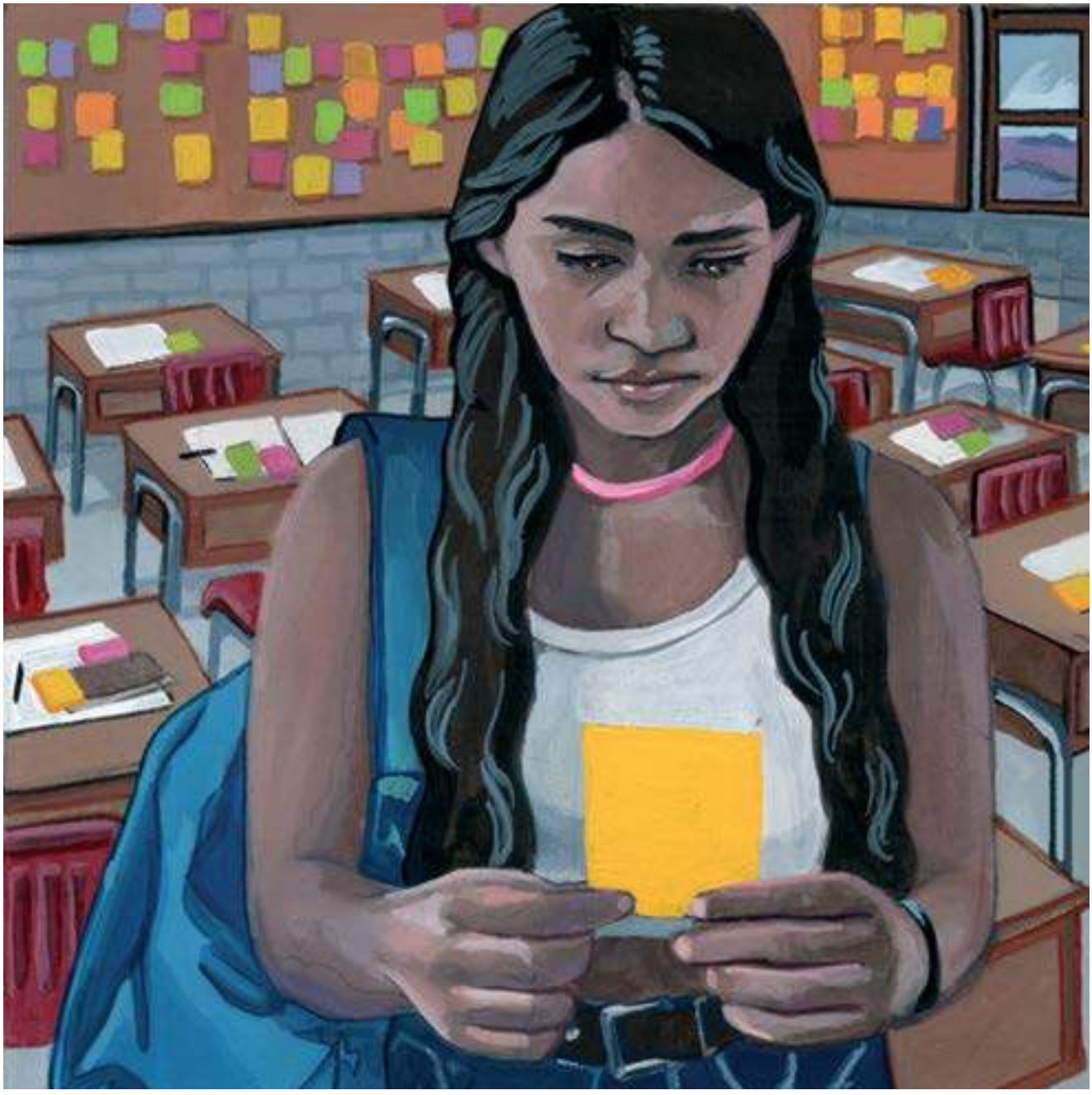

Illustration by Steve Derrick

Candice Park, MD
Dr. Park (AΩA, The Ohio State University College of Medicine, 2023), is a resident physician Department of Internal Medicine, Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center.

The drives are my favorite. In the crisp mornings, a dewy condensation covers my car windshield. I wipe it off so I can see the wildlife along the way. Wide-eyed deer peer into my headlights, horses tiptoe the blurred borders of the highway, and cattle patiently await the gentle warmth from the morning sun. Darkness gradually fades to light, and the serenity that pervades feels quite meditative. With a deep breath, I accept Earth's invitation to start my day.

The late 6 p.m. drives energize me too, though for different reasons. The pink and orange hues that had painted the sky earlier that morning return as new, golden shades. Dramatic shadows begin to rest between the isolated rock formations, giving them an even grander appearance. An occasional flux of birds recedes into the evening sky. Just as I was welcomed into the day by nature, I feel as though this is her way of whispering, "goodnight."

My heart rests peacefully in awe of South Dakota's natural beauty. My mind, however, fights an unavoidable feeling of confusion. I know these idyllic snapshots of the Pine Ridge Reservation contrast starkly with the lives of the people who call this land home. Each drive past the site of the Wounded Knee Massacre, reminds me of the horrors people on the reservation once faced, and the injustices they juggle even to this day.

Who? What? When? Where? Why? Endless questions bounce around my head as I struggle to untangle the decades of complex history that have led to the equally complex present reality.

The bell rings and students start trickling into the classroom. I have been assigned to teach ninth-grade through 11th grade students at Lakota Technical High School, a new facility constructed two years before my arrival. Inside, the building fosters vibrant school spirit with bright red lockers lining the halls and the *tatanka* (bison) mascot painted on a mural in the cafeteria. A second bell chimes, and just like that, class begins.

Who?

"Who are you going to be teaching?" This was a question I was frequently asked when I told my friends and family that I would be spending a month on a reservation in South Dakota. After eyeing my roster for the first time, I too wondered who would come to class.

Soon enough, I learned the futility of this question. Attendance would ebb and flow unpredictably—some days just six or seven students, other days, a full classroom of 15-20 students.

Chronic absenteeism contributes to the educational outlook on the reservation, a negative trajectory tied to higher drop-out rates and poorer academic performance. After speaking with the students, fellow teachers, and Anne, the school's community liaison, I understood there was no single reason that could capture why so many students were absent.

Myriad factors were at play, from transportation issues and bullying to deaths in the family, caring for siblings, and helping out family members with work. This is compounded by the historically negative relationship the American Indian community has had with the education system. Seeds of mistrust were planted with each child forcibly removed from their indigenous culture and taken away into boarding schools.

Over time, however, that question of "Who?" gained new meaning for me. I started thinking less about the number of kids who made it to class and more about who each individual student was as a person. I would eventually learn not only their names, but also their skills and weaknesses, their preferred learning styles, their hobbies, and the subtleties of their individual personalities. I would learn their career goals and aspirations, which ranged from being a maternal-fetal medicine physician to an architect and a woodworker.

Through weeks of built-up trust and one-on-one conversations, I learned of their personal struggles and insecurities. These students gradually opened up and offered me a piece of their lives, a glimpse into who they were both inside, and outside, of the classroom. Their vulnerability taught me patience, and together we discovered how we could teach each other in mutual partnership.

What?

I handed out a stack of Post-it notes to each student and instructed them to write on each piece of paper a different thing that stresses them out. We had just finished reviewing the physiology of stress and discussed the effects that stress hormones, like cortisol, can have on the body. The students were to categorize each of

their stressors as small, medium, or large, and place them around the classroom under their respective signs.

Ten minutes passed, and I began touring the room to read what the students had written. In my ignorance, I imagined students might write trivial things like school, grades or the classic getting in trouble by my parents. Instead, I found, "My mom not having a big enough place for all of us;" "My family, because we fight a lot;" "Home, I'm worried if I'm safe there;" "Just wondering if my family is safe;" "Not having my grandma to talk to anymore, because she was the only one who could guide me." I felt both regret and shame for asking this of them.

That moment was pivotal in my growth as a teacher. I came into this experience with a naïve understanding of the degree of poverty I would witness. Life expectancy in Pine Ridge is only 66.8 years, the lowest in the United States. Moreover, Oglala Lakota County has the lowest per capita income in the country, and ranks as the poorest county in the nation. Widespread family and housing instability are mere manifestations of this immense poverty.

One student shared with me that she lives with 30 other people, and because of this, she never gets restful sleep. From other students, I picked up on the themes of split parenthood and fractured families. As a result, many of these 14- and 15-year-olds are expected to assume the role of parent for their younger siblings.

I learned from Anne that many students become increasingly anxious around the time of the month when food stamps are distributed. They are worried their parents might sell their food stamps for money to gamble or purchase alcohol.

Reading the unseen burdens these students carry helped me gain an understanding of how important it would be to make a safe space for them—a space where they could learn and ask questions, free of judgment and worry.

As I reframed my perspective of what their lives looked like outside of the classroom, I saw value in highlighting topics like wellness and coping mechanisms. By giving them protected time each day to practice mindfulness exercises, and provide a holistic learning environment, I wanted to reinforce the idea that health sciences is not limited to medical and physical health—it includes mental, emotional, occupational, intellectual, financial, and spiritual well-being.

When?

"When is enough, enough?" This thought floated in my head while speaking with three of my students. Indigenous People's Day was coming so I decided to take time to sit together in small groups and discuss what Lakota culture means to each of them. During our conversation, I asked these young women about forms of discrimination they've experienced.

One student who plays on the varsity volleyball team recounted an episode from the Rapid City Invitational the prior weekend. She told me that the opposing team mocked them with tomahawk movements and whooping sounds, and their fans chuckled during the singing of the Lakota Flag Song. Another student shared how she was treated poorly when she attended middle school in a neighboring state. After learning she previously attended school on the reservation, teachers made assumptions of her academic performance and set low expectations. The third student chimed in stating she'd been asked numerous times, "Do you live in a teepee?"

Overhearing these anecdotes, another student contributed by sharing that non-indigenous people often greet her with a dramatic level of veneration, saying, "It's such an honor to meet you." "Oh my gosh, that's happened to me too!," one by one they all agree with each other.

Growing up Korean American, I remember isolating feelings of self-shame regarding my own Korean heritage. I didn't want people to see that I was different, often fibbing about what my family ate for dinner, or hushing my mom when she spoke her native language in public.

In contrast to that timid and insecure preteen I once embodied, the young students before me stood tall and firm. They maintained pride for their Lakota culture despite their shared experiences of discrimination and bullying.

The prejudice, racism, and ignorance that plagues our country is discouraging; however, I am encouraged by the hope and confidence these young people exude.

Where?

"Where are these women?" A voice echoes through the Thunder Valley community room. We sit together at a round table listening to the TED Talk playing from the iPad speaker. I'm next to a 10-year-old girl and her two friends. She tells me she's a foster child. We're all joined together for the second Girls Society meeting. The Girls Society is a year-long program held at Thunder Valley

that aims to empower young indigenous girls through female-centered programming and peer-to-peer mentorship.

The TED Talk introduces the topic of missing and murdered Indigenous women to the young audience. It contains upsetting statistics, such as the murder rate for Indigenous women on reservations being 10 times higher than the national average, and murder being the third leading cause of death among this demographic. Furthermore, women on the reservation lack adequate access to trauma-informed care and social services. They've fought a tiring battle against the justice system, as many non-Native criminals escape punishment, and many cases go unresolved.

As the TED Talk concludes, the girls are asked to draw a faceless doll on the paper in front of them.

As I sit among them, I feel an aching sense of unease. Indigenous women have been so devalued by society that they're depicted as faceless or devoid of any identity. And, at such a young age, these girls swallow such grave statistics about their own sisters, mothers, aunts, grandmothers, and friends from the reservation.

Through this powerful message, I learned how imperative it is for us to prioritize the safety and well-being of Indigenous women, and call attention to the causes that make them most susceptible to violence and assault.

Why?

"But why?" This question arose often as I wrestled with the glaring disparities. I think about the slowly recovering education and housing infrastructure, the broken and mistrusted health care system, and the years of injustice interwoven throughout the reservation. I knew that I hadn't even begun to scratch the surface of understanding the causes that maintain these harsh realities.

I also reflected on my own why. Why did I choose to go to Pine Ridge, to Thunder Valley, to Lakota Technical High School? To be honest, my answer to this question has evolved over the course of the month. I was there. I came to Pine Ridge initially wanting to teach the high school students interesting medical topics, and expose them to careers in the health sciences. I thought, I could inspire someone to become a doctor or a nurse someday.

I left Pine Ridge realizing that my why had grown so much bigger than I ever anticipated. I wanted to build trust with students who were just beginning to understand their potential. I wanted to create a safe space during our short hour-and-a-half together each day, especially for those students who otherwise felt unsafe.

I wanted to open my ears in each conversation to convey to the students that they are heard and supported. And, I wanted to celebrate the rich cultural identity of the Lakota Sioux. By using this month to learn about the systemic disparities that exist, I believe I have come out an even stronger ally, friend, and supporter of America's Indigenous communities. This experience highlighted my why of being a doctor—to connect with others in a way that celebrates their personhood, and to guide them through their health journey so they can live out their lives to their fullest potential.

Dr. Lisa Alvord, author of *The Scalpel and the Silver Bear*, says it best:

"The best surgeons didn't operate on gallbladders, or spleens, or hearts, they operated on the people who owned them. People with children, jobs, interests, and beliefs. They operated on lives."[1]

References

1. Alvord, Lori Arviso and Elizabeth. Cohen. 2000. The Scalpel and the Silver Bear. Bantam Books.

The author's E-mail address is candice.park@osumc.edu.