Summer at Milk's C

Simplicity is the beauty and the challenge of a Lakota Youth Program that grew from one woman's vision quest

PHOTOS AND STORY BY BERNIE HUNHOFF

SUMMER CAMPS ARE as common as sunflowers in South Dakota, but only at Milk's Camp will you learn to fall off a horse, find wild turnips, throw a spear and ease a toothache.

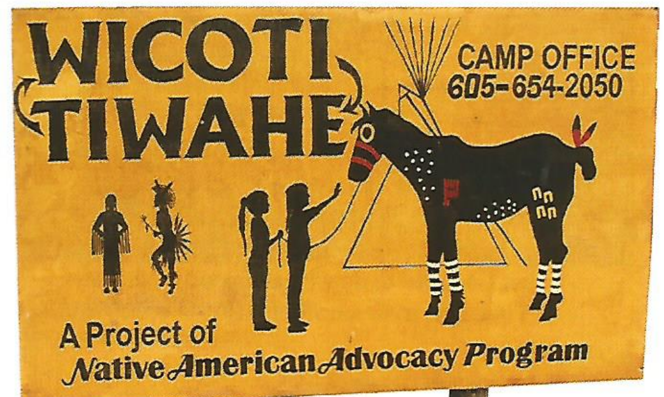
And most importantly, the youth at Milk's Camp — a somewhat-forgotten place in Gregory County — learn the rich spirituality of Lakota culture. The activity is known as Family Camp *(Wicoti Tiwahe)*, and it grew from an effort to do something about

Camp

Canvas tipis painted with Lakota symbolism provide lodging and storage for youth at Family Camp in Gregory County.

a rash of suicides on the Rosebud Reservation 10 years ago.

Community leaders and youth met at the St. Francis School in 2002 to consider solutions. Roy Stone, a medicine man from Mission, opened the program with a prayer and spoke of the Lakota circle of life. Other government and tribal leaders then offered their perspectives. Afterwards, someone surveyed the youth to see if any of the presen-



tations had an impact. Most of the teens remembered one particular speaker: the medicine man.

"I thought about that for awhile, and then I realized that he was different because he spoke about their culture and they must have wanted that connection," says Marla BullBear, a camp founder.

She and several friends then met around artist Steve Tamayo's kitchen table at Rosebud and came up with a "brainstorm," a summer of camps designed to connect teens with their Lakota roots.

The first summer was a success, but it left BullBear with a gnawing feeling that she must do more. She and six female friends who were also in reservation leadership roles realized they all needed to find their direction in life.

It wasn't lost on them that seven is a significant number in Lakota spirituality. At first they met with Tillie Black Bear, a Rosebud leader who founded the White Buffalo Calf Women's Society (who died July 19, just as this story was being written). With Tillie's encouragement, the seven sought out Roy Stone, the medicine man who'd started it all. He suggested that they do a vision quest, a *hanblecha*.

Marla BullBear calls herself a reluctant leader. "I would prefer to be a worker. It's hard to be in leadership and be a woman in any culture. But this is what I'm supposed to be doing."

Vision quests are commonly known as a young man's way of finding his purpose, but they are for women as well. Males often do a four-day quest, while women traditionally spend 24 hours "up on the hill."

The hill for BullBear was a summit above the pine timber reserves on the Rosebud. "That helped me clarify what I needed to do with the youth," she says.

That was nine summers ago — 6,000 young campers ago.

So the summer camps continued. Rosebud Sioux Tribe provided 10 acres on the old site of Milk's Camp, a community founded by the renowned Chief Milk. Although most of the residences are now gone, there is still a pow wow grounds along Ponca Creek, and an Episcopal Church. Chief Milk is buried on a hill above the old wooden church.

The youth retreats are now known as Family Camp (*Wicoti Tiwahe),* run under the auspices of an already existing non-profit called the Native American Advocacy Program. At least four camps are now held every summer; each four days long and with a different theme. Harvest camp in early June is based around the Indian culture's edible and medicinal herbs; 300 have been identified on the camp's grounds alone including wild turnips, purple coneflower (the root eases toothaches), sweetgrass used for smudging and wide-leafed wild sage, which was brought from Bear Butte and reseeded.

"Last year we harvested 2,000 turnips in a few hours," says BullBear. "We always teach conservation, we teach not to take everything. Always harvest just a third. We also offer a prayer for the plant nation, thanking them for sharing themselves with us."

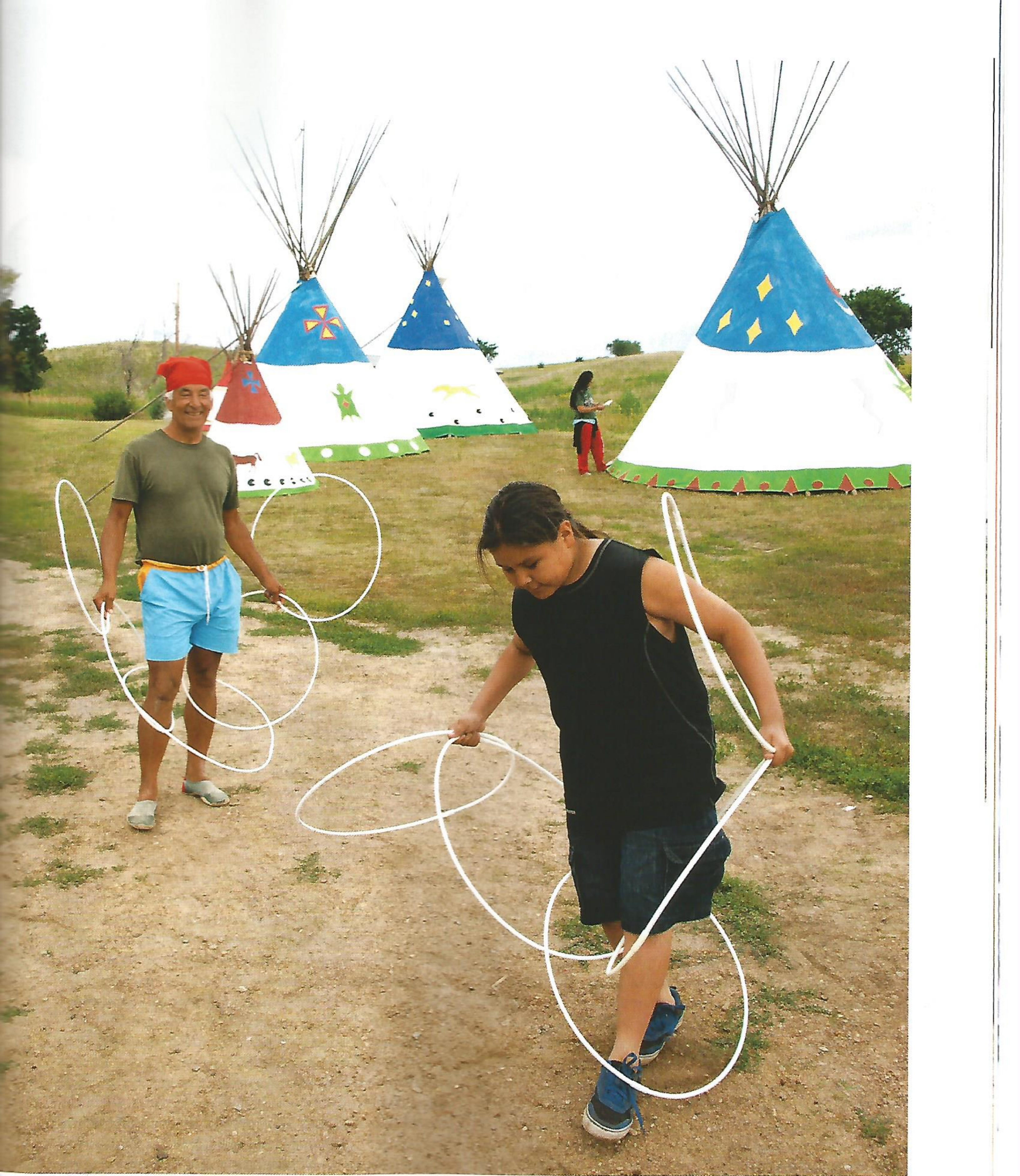
A hunting camp is held every November, headed by Marla's husband Chuck, a former tribal game warden. Participants must pass the state firearm safety program to qualify. They hunt deer, turkey and pheasant, and they learn to use almost every part of the animal. "We save the sinew for bows and arrows, and the bones for games," says Steve Tamayo, the Family Camp's cultural arts specialist.

Ashley Hanson, a young farmer and hunting guide, helps with the horse camp. The first lesson is to treat the horse like a close relative. "You wouldn't sneak up on your mother or your grandmother," she says. "It's all about being a good relative."

And if the horse isn't responding in kind, Hanson diplomatically teaches how to dismount from a runaway. "Have your feet hit the ground first, not your head," she advises. Try to hug the horse and slide down his neck or side.

Tamayo says signs of prehistoric horses have been found in the Badlands, but the horse culture disappeared for eons. "The modern coming of the horse was in 1680 when the Pueblo were fighting the Spaniards, and the horse was released into the hands of the tribes once again." He says the story of a horse coming back to the Lakota was found as early as 1709 on a winter count, a pictorial history painted on a buffalo hide.

A leadership camp, held every July, focuses on Roy Stone's message of understanding and respecting the Lakota culture. "The art, the history, the symbols, all this is incorporated into a way of life for us," Tamayo says.



Kevin Locke (left), an accomplished Lakota dancer and musician, is one of several notable guests who help mentor youth like Daris Benally (right), who desperately wanted to learn the complicated moves of a hoop dancer.

Lakota linguist Earl Bullhead (left photo) of North Dakota helped teens at Family Camp form a drum group called Young Society. Bullhead says he learned the Lakota language by listening to his father's friends tell stories in the city park at McLaughlin. At right, Izzy Tamayo practiced the flute at camp; Kevin Locke taught a workshop on how to make and play the instrument.

"We acknowledge the sky, we acknowledge the Earth. We acknowledge the importance of water. For example, we explain the importance of water. No child is permitted to play with water here. Water is life. It is our being. They can play in the lake or the river."

Tamayo knows the meanings of hundreds of Lakota symbols. Circles around a horse's eye show keen eyesight. Circles around his leg indicate the journeys he's traveled. Hail is the power of nature. Turtles, snakes and eagles all have significance. Even the hourglass shape of the tipi has meaning; it symbolizes that whatever exists on Earth also exists up above.

Tamayo gives the youth 30 or 40 such symbols and then invites them to create their own stories, using the art. Several large tipis at Milk's Camp feature the Lakota symbols.

Every camp shares certain customs, including the setup of the tipis, sweet grass ceremonies, a sweat lodge, music and games. And on the final night of each camp, the youth and their adult instructors climb a hill to an amphitheater and watch a movie. It's the only time candy and soda are permitted. Movie night is a nod to modern society, but BullBear says the adults try to arrange for a film with a Native American theme. One night they showed *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* but it saddened the non-Indians so much that BullBear stopped it before the conclusion.

The reaction may not have been so strong at a less-natural environment — at home on the sofa or at a theater surrounded by drapery and a popcorn aroma. But at Milk's Camp, with the smell of sage and sweetgrass in the night air and true-to-life tipis silhouetted in the western sky, the story of the displaced Lakota is genuine. And all the sad stories are not in the past; some of the youth have survived their private Wounded Knees.

"We've had a lot of prayer here," says BullBear. "Our

youth are constantly praying for their families and for the healing of their friends and their families."

Most come to Milk's Camp from other tribal communities, where 80 percent of the adults are jobless, where the infant mortality rate is a hundred times the nation's average and where life expectancy for a male is 47. And the suicide rate for teens remains five times higher than for other American teens.

BullBear and her assistants don't have the time or resources to track the success rate of the 6,000 youth who have now attended camps. They hardly have the time or dollars to stage the camps. "We run on a shoestring," she says. "The tribe has helped. The state has helped. If we had $100,000 a year we would be flourishing but we're probably operating on half of that."

If she had more resources, she'd build an awning by the horse corral, so participants and spectators would have shade, and she'd expand the camp kitchen. "We'd like to teach our kids how to cook healthier and to use plants from the garden but we don't have the facilities right now."

Also, the tipis are now nine years old. A new lodge would cost $1,500 so BullBear sat in the hot sun this summer, mending the canvas.

Since she doesn't have the money to replace the tipis, she surely hasn't spent a dime measuring the success of the camp. But she says she knows the campers, and has followed their lives.

Gabby Iron Shell is the poster girl of Milk's Camp. She became a camp leader after several summers. Now a college graduate, she has just finished her first year of teaching at Todd County Public Schools.

College degrees are a tough measuring stick for any society, but any visitor to the 10 acres of prairie, trees and tipis would probably agree that the young peoples' laughter, their attentiveness and enthusiasm is an accomplishment.

It doesn't take a visitor very long to recognize that the strength of Family Camp is BullBear's knack for recruiting talented adults to show up as mentors, teachers and guests. When we arrived at the leadership camp, several children were circled around Tamayo, learning to play a game based on hiding bones. Several others followed the instructions of famed hoop dancer Kevin Locke, who traveled the breadth of South Dakota from his home in Kenel on the North Dakota border, to teach dancing and flutemaking.

Daris Benally, a young boy from Crow Creek wearing a black shirt and blue jeans, was trying especially hard to mimic Locke's fluid motions with the hoops. Daris looked clumsy by comparison, but happy even as his hoops rolled from his grasp. Later, during a sunset hike down a dirt road, he and Locke, the world-renowned musician and dancer, walked side-by-side, chatting like old friends.

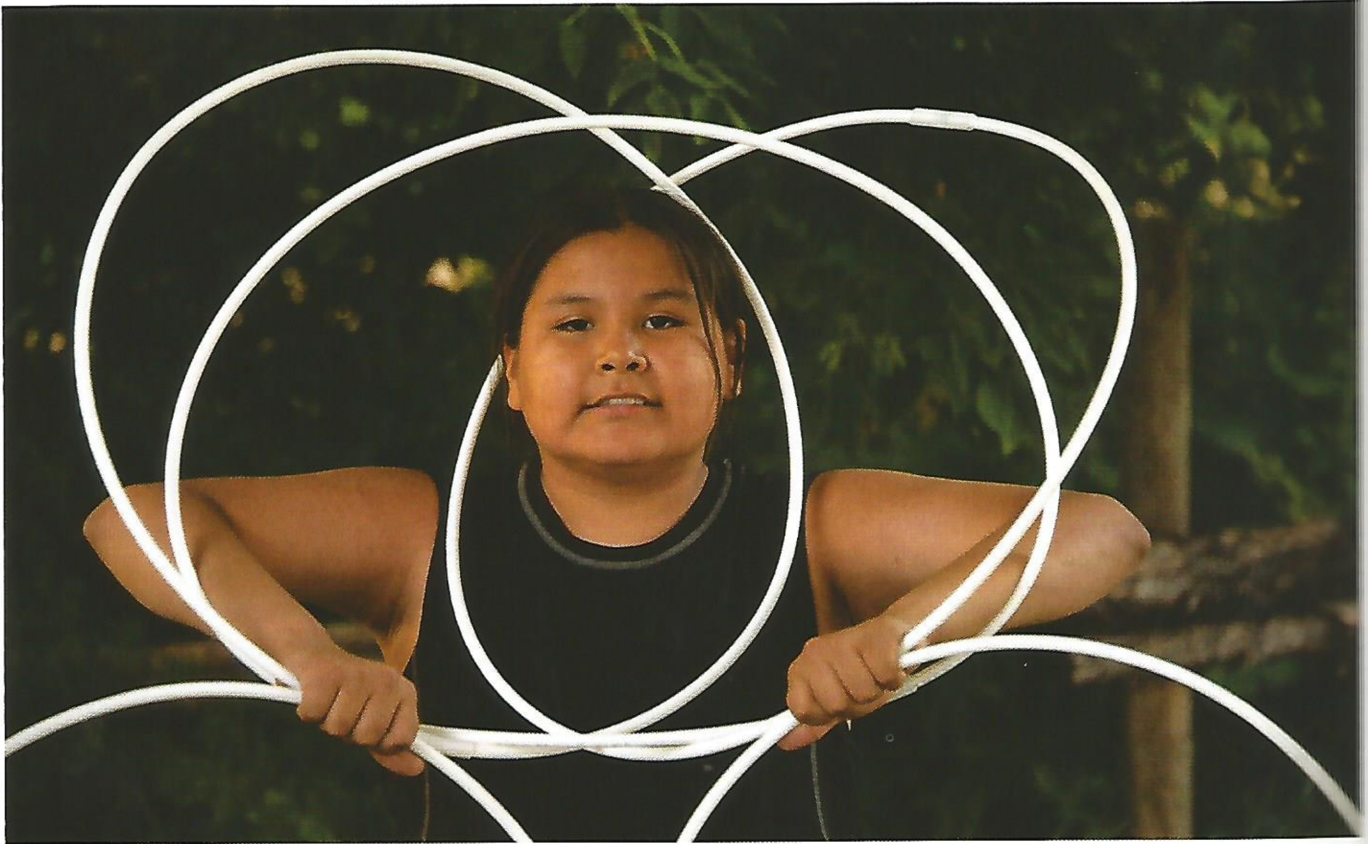
Kevin Swalley (left) and Fred Fast Horse (right) learn lessons about the horse from equine director Ashley Hanson. A special camp is dedicated each summer to horsemanship but some of the teaching is incorporated into every camp. Hanson, a local farmer and hunting guide, has studied equine assisted psychotherapy; she has also learned from her Lakota elders.

As they and the other hikers passed Ponca Creek, a blue heron took flight. That prompted Marla BullBear to halt the hike for a short story about a heron who got in trouble by forgetting his traditions.

In early evening, teenage boys gathered with Earl Bullhead, a well-known Lakota language teacher and musician from North Dakota, to practice his pow wow songs. Bullhead has helped the boys form a drum group they call the Young Society.

Through the years, BullBear has invited writers, singers, politicians, medicine men, actors, artists, firefighters and dozens of other leaders both from within and outside Lakota country to teach at the camp.

Tamayo's roots are on the Rosebud but he lives in Ne-



One of America's most graceful methods of storytelling is the Native American hoop dance. Symbols and elements of nature add meaning to the dancer's movement and the formations created. Daris Benally, a youngster from Pierre, learned to fashion an eagle at Family Camp.

braska and works as a cultural consultant with Omaha's public schools. He is an artist, and he is also involved with the Natural Museum of American Indians in Washington, D.C., where he is currently assisting with an exhibit called "As We Go," a study of traditional games. As busy as all that entails, he still makes time to come to Milk's Camp because he has bought into BullBear's vision.

In his travels outside South Dakota, Tamayo often meets people who are surprised to learn that he is a Lakota. "They'll say, 'Indians? Are they still alive?' They think we all died with the buffalo long ago," he laughs.

But like the horse and the buffalo, the Indians are still in South Dakota, still at Milk's Camp, for that matter, learning old truths that BullBear and Tamayo hope will give meaning to young lives.

"We are incorporating the complexity of simplicity into everyday life," says Tamayo. "It can help these kids. I've seen it. In fact, I think everyone could benefit from that."

And Daris, the boy who was trying so hard to learn Locke's sophisticated hoop dance? By nightfall he was able to fan five hoops into an eagle formation.

"Come watch Daris!" cried a little girl. "He can do it!"

RINGING REMEMBRANCE

Sophia High Dog died more than a century ago, but the girl's memory rings out on Sunday mornings as an old cast-iron bell sounds at All Saint's Church at Milk's Camp.

Sophia was orphaned at a very young age and then adopted by a family from New York City. Her health failed in the city. Near death, the teenager spoke longingly of her Gregory County home and told her parents she wished she could do something for them.

After the girl's death, the mother and father commissioned an engraved bell for the simple, wood-frame Episcopal church and it was hung in the bell tower in 1904. It breaks the quiet of the Ponca Creek valley, south of Bonesteel, for twice-monthly services.