

Lame Deer students find new opportunities in First Voices project

Photos And Story By Jaci Webb Of The Laurel Outlook

Thursday, March 17, 2022



Lame Deer students gather for a group photo last week during their First Voices workshop. Pictured from left are Lisa Eaglefeathers, Shandiin Kaline, Burton Tallwhiteman, Santesa Rowland, Kaleb Mason, and Paradise Killsnight.

Lame Deer High School junior Shandiin Kaline dreams of inspiring others with her actions and words.

The first step for Kaline was to take a bold move forward by participating in First Voices, a project founded by New York City choreographer and dancer Preeti Vasudevan. First Voices

interweaves artistic creation of ancestral stories through digital media and a mentorship program for tribal youth. Ten Lame Deer students were selected for the inaugural group in First Voices.

During a workshop last week at Billings Open Studio, Kaline shared a poem she wrote about her mother.

“I never poured by heart out on a piece of paper like that before,” Kaline said.

The poem, “Dragonflies at the Sundance,” expressed how her mother came to her as a dragonfly to tell her everything will be OK.

Like others in the program, Kaline has experienced loss. Her mother died two years ago, and Kaline is still finding ways to process her grief.

“I cried like a big baby,” Kaline said about the experience of reading her poem to the group.

The students have developed a close bond with each other, something necessary to allow them to fully express their dreams and hopes for the future.



Tami Haaland, poet and acting dean at Montana State University Billings, works with Lame Deer students at Billings Open Studio last week.

Tami Haaland, a poet and acting dean at Montana State University-Billings, led the students in a workshop to build a modern interpretation of a Northern Cheyenne story about a race. Haaland encouraged the students to tell the story through the eyes of an animal. She assigned different animals to each student, including a buffalo, an eagle and a deer.

Seidel Standing Elk, a language and cultural teacher at Lame Deer High School, said the students have so much potential that he is seeing blossom through First Voices. Standing Elk said the students are like sponges, picking up positive and negative behaviors through the people and circumstances they are exposed to. When he sees a student getting in trouble, he tells them, "It's not the Cheyenne way. It's not our lifestyle."

"If they can recognize it, I tell them to just walk away from trouble. Don't be part of it."

Standing Elk said he goes over 130 Cheyenne beliefs with them.

"That's what helps them -- keeping their culture alive. It strengthens them, it really does," Standing Elk said.

Susan Wolfe, Lame Deer art teacher, helped write a grant for Lame Deer schools to be included in a Turnaround Arts program. Lame Deer was selected as one of eight schools across the country to be a School of Promise. Through that program, which also included Yo-Yo Ma's Silkroad, Vasudevan first traveled to Montana and worked with the Lame Deer students. She was so inspired by the students, Vasudevan founded First Voices through her Thresh Collective, a performing arts organization founded by Vasudevan in 2005.

"Ultimately the students will work with different disciplines—choreography, music, visual art, literary art and music composition," Vasudevan said.

Wolfe said she wants the students to learn to use their voices to dream big.

"They are learning how to share their thoughts. We are working with students so their voices can be heard," Wolfe said.

Paradise Killsnight, a 17-year-old junior at Lame Deer High School, said she wants to learn to communicate better with others so she can express herself better.

"I really don't know what I want to do with my life, but I want to be successful, go to college and be independent," Killsnight said. "I'm learning to be myself in the moment."

Ultimately, Vasudevan plans to expand First Voices to other Montana reservations, using the first group of students as interns in the program.

"We can feed off our amazing cultures, that is our soul food," she said.