

# NORTHERN CHEYENNE RESERVATION HOSTS CLEVELAND MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Steve Brady, Northern Cheyenne tribal elder and historian describes the Little Big Horn battle.

Would you rather spend your vacation in the Bahamas or Montana? A group of seventh and eighth grade students from [The Lillian and Betty Ratner School](#) in Pepper Pike, Ohio—near Cleveland—traveled to Montana to join tribal elders and students on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation in May, and felt a little gipped at first. This was the first year the school went somewhere other than the



Bahamas.

Sam Chestnut, head of the school, said he wanted to do a different trip, one that was more connected to the curriculum.

“Even on the plane ride to Montana there was skepticism,” he said. But when the students started meeting people on the reservation they were “immediately interested in learning from the Cheyenne. It was clear that they had changed their minds.”

Chestnut said the first immersion activity was participating in a sweat lodge, which “was really

powerful for many of them.” He said while in the sweat lodge, the students were invited to pray in whatever language they wanted. Chestnut said one student felt hearing prayers in multiple languages—Cheyenne, English, Hebrew—was moving.

“I have always felt greatly connected to my religion but I have never truly showed it. I feel as if my time in the sweat lodge has melted away my wrongdoings, and the devotion the Cheyenne showed for their people, culture and religion has truly opened my eyes to what I could do to make myself into a better person,” said Kendall Anderson, 13.

One of the students got a better grasp on race. “Before this trip I understood racism as black and white, I now understand that this issue is so much more complex than that,” said Joanna Levin, 13.

Another student appreciated the history lesson. “I learned more about American history in two days on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation from tribal leaders than an entire year in history class. I can't believe how welcoming they were to strangers like us,” Carter Weinberg, 14.

And the Northern Cheyenne were happy to share their ways with the students. “We are always willing to share our history and teach some our culture/traditions and language with those who are willing to learn, young and old,” said Barbara Braided Hair, of the Northern Cheyenne Nation.

While in Montana the students visited Rosebud Battlefield and Little Bighorn National Battlefield, the site of Custer's last stand.

At Rosebud Chestnut said the lesson was more about “what life was like for the Cheyenne at that time” than about history. And the prevalent lesson while visiting Little Bighorn was to get across how

the Northern Cheyenne were a group of people living their lives. ... trying to stay connected to the lifestyle they had known.”

“I never will be able to look at land the same way ever again. You taught me about the struggle the Cheyenne went through to live on the land they called home.

Now I won't ever be able to take my home for granted,” said Kyra Dawkins, 13.

To help prepare the students for the trip, Chestnut arranged for Dr.

Richard Littlebear, president and interim dean of [Chief Dull Knife College](#), to visit Ohio. Littlebear discussed Northern Cheyenne history and the struggle the nation—and other tribal nations—faces trying to preserve their language and culture.

The students also established relationships with their tribal counterparts in Montana by writing letters before the trip. Those relationships continue to grow since the trip has ended as well.

The Northern Cheyenne hold a special place in Chestnut's heart, he said his family has had a 40-year relationship with them because his father served as general counsel for the nation. He had “very powerful experiences” during the time he spent on the reservation as a child that has shaped how he sees the world.

And he was glad he got to share that with his students.

“In the end I can honestly say that no one has any regrets about not going to the Bahamas, which is validating,” Chestnut said.



Middle school student exits from a sweat lodge in Montana.