WORD COUNT: 633

Unci’s Prepare to Take Sacred Foods Teachings Across Pine Ridge

By Yvette Running Horse

PINE RIDGE – Elders, families, and community representatives gathered at the Oglala Lakota College (OLC) Piya Wiconi campus in Kyle, South Dakota on Saturday, November 17th to begin planning for an Oglala Lakota Nation-wide sacred foods preparation program.

This program, called “Ensuring Our Grandmothers’ Teachings are Here with Us,” would offer young girls and women in each of the nine districts of Pine Ridge the opportunity to learn the art of making wasná (dried buffalo meat) and campá (ground and dried chokecherries) from elder knowledge bearers who are willing to share their teachings.

“Understanding how to care for our traditional foods and prepare them in a sacred manner has always been an important part of our rights of passage teachings,” said Dr. Loretta Afraid of Bear-Cook, 71, one of the master teachers present at this day-long event. “My grandfather George Sword taught us that these ways were for us to give, not for us to keep.”

This planning meeting, which was offered in conjunction with OLC’s Continuing Education Program, was open to anyone from each of the nine districts who wished to attend. More than 50 participants braved the snow to learn from one another and step forward to offer their guidance, suggestions, and their intention to collaborate.

“Although the weather was challenging today, I felt that I needed to be here so I could see what was being presented and how I, as one of the tribal leaders, can help,” said Jackie Siers, a Council Member for the Wakpamni District. Siers paid close attention as Dr. Afraid of Bear-Cook shared some of the stories behind the preparation of wasná and campá. “I remember seeing my grandmother making these, but hearing the stories today means a lot. I understand now why we offer these particular foods and I was delighted to see how they were made.”

Many of those who attended were men who came to accompany their wives and daughters. Ross Segura, 36, is a father of seven children who lives in Slim Buttes. “I remember the feeling of being taught these sacred teachings by my grandparents, and I want my kids to grow up with those same values,” said Mr. Segura, who stated that not a day passes when he does not think of something his grandparents taught him about how to live a good life. “We as Lakota people are so rich in culture that it is almost a sin not to keep these ways alive.”

Tsenesa Ducheneaux, 13, from Kyle listened respectfully as the four master teachers shared their experiences, stories, and the sacred foods that they brought. Following the instructions given, she carefully approached the bowls placed in front of each person and added oil from the kidney fat of the buffalo to the ground chokecherries.

“As a young woman, I was interested in coming so that I can understand how to prepare these foods and learn why they are important to us as Lakota people,” stated Ducheneaux, a student at Red Cloud Indian School. “Our people have been here for a very long time. People may not always notice us, but we play a very big part in this world.”

According to Dr. Afraid of Bear-Cook, the goal is to help each district to host an annual sacred food preparation gathering sometime between August and October. In order to make these events a success, she is seeking the help of more master teachers, donations of buffalo or buffalo meat, a physical location within each district where the events can be hosted, as well as community organizations that wish to partner. “Today’s planning meeting was beautiful. We are looking forward to working with each of the families and organizations that have offered their support,” says Dr. Afraid of Bear-Cook. “We welcome each and every family who wishes to participate.”