



The Asniya Bulletin

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Asniya's History

Asniya was started in 1995 by Miles Cunningham, a 4th year medical student at Harvard Medical School. Miles wanted to teach about medicine at a reservation school using elective time he had available during his medical training. He wrote to several reservation schools throughout South Dakota, and Crow Creek High School took him up on his offer. He resided within the Crow Creek Reservation and integrated himself into the community during his time there. He taught 9th graders about the science of health and medicine. Miles came prepared with novel medically-related hands-on and visual teaching tools. Through this style of teaching, kids were captivated by his lessons and by the field of medicine. Miles also gained by honing his teaching skills and learning about the Dakota culture. Because it was such a rewarding experience



Miles Cunningham and students, Crow Creek HS, 1995

for the children and for Miles, he decided this experience must continue on as a program. Soon after Miles's rotation at Crow Creek, a Dakota elder named this new program Asniya meaning "to heal" or "to cure" in the Dakota language. Miles went on to recruit other Harvard Medical students to teach as he did at Crow Creek. In 2002 Asniya incorporated as a non-profit organization through the state of South Dakota and received 501(c)3 designation through the federal government. Over the last 19 years, Asniya has set up one-month rotations at various sites throughout South Dakota serving American Indian children. These rotations have been set up mostly for medical students, but other student disciplines have included dental, nursing, and pre-med.

Health Through Knowledge

A Reinvention of Existing Programming

While Asniya has been in existence since 1995, it has operated as a volunteer-run, grassroots organization, with a modest infrastructure. In 2012 Asniya decided it was time to take the organization to the next level due to continued pressures placed on local schools and teachers to meet standardized curriculum and test requirements. To maintain continued success, Asniya needed to expand its infrastructure, develop a formalized curriculum that would meet state and national



Danica Liberman, Tiospa Zina Tribal School, 2003

science standards, and concentrate its efforts at one site. Asniya decided, in order to accomplish this, its first goal should be grow its board of directors, which it has done and continues to do. Asniya is now poised to build on its 19 years of experience, and is working on a new program called **Health Through Knowledge**. Through this new program a formalized, culturally relevant curriculum will be developed for middle school age students using a dynamic, hands-on approach to teaching.



Students learn to take vital signs, 2010

Medical students will continue to serve as "Asniya interns" and will travel to the Pine Ridge Reservation for a 4-week teaching rotation. Asniya has been in talks with Red Cloud Indian School

to develop and launch **Health Through Knowledge** to serve 7th and 8th grades. In addition, Asniya plans to develop and implement a strong mentorship program in collaboration with the University of South Dakota Healthcare Scholars program, providing guidance and support to young students showing a strong interest in pursuing health care careers. After developing this strong mentorship program at the high school level, **Health Through Knowledge** also plans to extend its support and guidance into the college years. Once **Health Through Knowledge** is launched and successful at a single school on the Pine Ridge Reservation, Asniya will replicate the program at other schools on the Pine Ridge Reservation and then on to other reservations.

Annual Board of Directors Meeting

On June 4 - 6, 2015 several Asniya Board Members met in South Dakota for Asniya's second annual in-person planning



meeting. The Board spent the first day meeting with administrators and staff at Red Cloud Indian School to discuss the possibility of launching **Health Through Knowledge** at their school.

Following the meeting with Red Cloud, the Board took the opportunity to drive through the Pine Ridge reservation, visiting the Pine Ridge Indian Health Service Hospital and various historical sites to continue to learn more about the community. The day wrapped up with an insightful and enthusiastic tour of the Kyle Indian Health Center, an outlying clinic located on the Pine Ridge Reservation. The second day was equally productive, with a Board meeting at Rapid City Public Library to discuss topics ranging from improvements to the Asniya website to the development of Asniya's **Health Through Knowledge** curriculum. Finally, the trip was punctuated by a hike to the face of Crazy Horse at the annual Volksmarch event on June 6th.



Board Members at Red Shirt Table on the Pine Ridge Reservation, l to r: Miles Cunningham, Holly Frost, Danica Liberman, Tracy Zacher, Richard Abdo

2015 Wildlife Loop Triathlon Fundraising Event



Team Asniya at Stockade Lake in Custer State Park
l to r: Kasey, Tracy, and Alex

Tracy Zacher, Asniya's Board President, has set out to raise funding and awareness about Asniya's goals and mission by participating in an annual triathlon. Now, Tracy is by no means a triathlete, but she is a born swimmer (she could swim before she could walk). Tracy enlisted her former triathlon relay team to help her in this effort. Their team name is Team Asniya and includes her brother, Alex, and good friend, Kasey. Tracy is Team Asniya's swimmer, Kasey is the cyclist, and Alex is the runner. Team Asniya most recently participated in the Wildlife Loop Triathlon in Custer State Park, South Dakota on Saturday, September 12th, 2015. It was a 1/2 Iron Man distance, and they placed second. They had a lot of fun, raised a lot of awareness and received \$750 in pledges for Asniya. They plan to participate in a different triathlon each year.

Alumni Point of View - Ken Masters

In 2007 I arrived at Pine Ridge, fresh faced and eager with my white coat and silk tie to begin my rotation as an Asniya intern. I was assigned to teach advanced science at Pine Ridge High school, with Laura Simon, a fellow medical student also taking the Asniya rotation as part of her medical training. Through the generosity of Asniya, we found a room in the little settlement of Wounded Knee, northeast of the town of Pine Ridge. Wounded Knee is famous in American history for the Massacre at Wounded Knee Creek in the winter of 1890, in which hundreds of Lakota men, women and children were killed by members of the U.S. 7th Cavalry. I read a lot in preparation for my time on the reservation. One of the stories I read was about an infant girl found alive in the aftermath of that massacre, shielded from the elements by her mother's frozen body. She was named Lost Bird and was adopted by Brigadier General Leonard Colby and taken back east. Most of the stories ended there. But with more digging I learned the General abandoned his family while she was still a child. She struggled to find a

place of belonging, not fitting in either the place of her birth or the place of her benefactor. She was expelled from several different schools. She eventually found work in a Wild West Show. She died in poverty at the age of 29 in California in 1919. Being raised in the Cherokee Nation in a traditional household, I knew firsthand how America seemed to keep Native people stuck in the past, somehow missing or ignoring the complexity of the real story. Text books were full of what happened 150 years ago but nothing about the present. I was anxious to know the real Pine Ridge, the people, the children and the stories. I wasn't disappointed.



Ken Masters, Pine Ridge HS, 2007

Looking back today, the thing most imprinted on my brain is the faces of the people and their stories. I can still see the two brothers with their spiky hair, red tennis shoes and ready smiles who were regulars at a local afterschool program. I remember a local woman with a remarkable connection to all the kids served by the program and how hard she worked to provide a safe place for them. I remember the teens, how hopeful they were, and how worried. Their capabilities were often underestimated by others and, sadly, too often by themselves. But I can still see the broad smiles on faces when the light bulb went off.

The person I think of the most is a little boy I met at one of the local schools. I can still see him in my mind like I first found him, sitting at a desk, head down on his folded arms. There were so many traumas in his young life, an idolized older brother involved with a gang, a mother in prison, a grandmother who loved him dearly but he feared she would pass away and leave him alone. His life mirrored what I saw in many other children in Native America, children at the crossroads of the vulnerable innocence of childhood and the assaulting realization of the complexity of their lives. He was fast approaching the fork in the road when he would decide, given his choices at hand, how to handle the fear and anger of his life. What parts would survive the struggle, the storyteller with little emotion talking about the harsh reality of the life that surrounded him or the gentle, at times tearful little boy, who loved his cat and worried about life without his grandmother? He would be about 17 years old now. I often wonder what choices he made.

I saw myself in so many of the faces on the reservation. Perhaps that is why I remember them so well. They each in

their own way profoundly changed the lens through which I was seeing life. Through their courage and sadness and fear and joy, I found my own. They will likely never know how my interaction with them affected me and my choices. I am now a psychiatrist working at an urban community health center in Houston, and I work with and counsel adults, adolescents and their families.

Upcoming Intern Rotation – Jessica St. Laurent

Over 60 interns have participated in Asniya since its inception, and plans are underway for the next intern to be placed in April 2016. In late summer the board was contacted by Jessica St.



Laurent, a fourth year student at Tufts University School of Medicine. Jessica has some familiarity with Pine Ridge already, having spent a week on the reservation in 2009 building homes while a senior at Saint Anselm College in New Hampshire. Jessica is originally from Seattle, and is an extraordinarily accomplished medical

student. She earned honors grades in all her third-year rotations and was awarded the OB/GYN Student of the Year at Baystate medical center in 2014 before spending a year at the Moon lab at the University of Washington through the Howard Hughes Medical Institute. There she studied the role of molecular signaling in cancer, and continues to contribute to her work there this year. Jessica is applying for residency programs in obstetrics and gynecology, and hopes to later specialize in gynecology-oncology. Jessica is excited to return to Pine Ridge to learn and contribute as a fourth year medical student this time around.

Along with school placement, the board is currently arranging for Jessica to become more familiar with healthcare on the reservation. As the Kyle Health Center has an emphasis on women's health, Jessica is particularly excited about spending time there. The board is incredibly grateful for the donations made to support teaching rotations such as Jessica's. Once the school placement is set, more specific items such as curriculum design will be prepared. Of course, as other interns can attest, you have to be able to think on your feet and adjust quickly as lesson plans may need to be changed at times!

The board looks forward to updating you on Jessica's experience this spring, and again wants to thank you for your help and support in making this work possible.

Meet the Board



Miles Cunningham, MD, PhD –
Founder



Ashley Fernandes, MD, PhD



Catherine Larkins



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