

Film and Food Festival to benefit Lakota people

Rotary fundraiser seeks to 'educate people through film, through food, through stories'

By Randolph T. Holhut/The Commons

BRATTLEBORO—Last year, the Brattleboro Rotary Club used its annual International Film and Food Festival to call attention to the plight of the Lakota people, Native Americans living on the Pine Ridge, Cheyenne River, and Rosebud Indian reservations, part of the Great Sioux Nation in South Dakota.

The proceeds from that event provided money to upgrade the equipment at KILI-FM, a nonprofit radio station that is that region's primary source of news, information, and entertainment. The station started broadcasting in 1983 as the first American Indian-owned radio station in the United States.

According to Brattleboro Rotary Club immediate past president Marty Cohn, the event also marked the start of a relationship between the Rotarians of Brattleboro and the Lakota Nation.

"It hasn't taken much for us to have an impact," Cohn said. "They tell us what they need, and we try to get it for them. It's taken time for them to build up trust and for us to learn patience."

Cohn said the club's fifth edition of the festival — scheduled for Sunday, March 2, from 4 to 8 p.m. at the New England Youth Theatre on Flat Street — seeks to "educate people through film, through food, through stories."

Besides helping KILI get some new equipment, Cohn said his club has also sent the radio station more than 100 refurbished laptop computers, which KILI is distributing to students who need them.

The assistance that the Brattleboro Rotary Club has offered is certainly welcome.

At the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, there are about 40,000 members of the Oglala Sioux tribe scattered over two million acres of some of the most desolate land in the upper Great Plains.

About half of Pine Ridge's residents are younger than 18, and nearly 70 percent of that number live in poverty. The unemployment rate is about 80 percent, and the annual per capita income is about \$4,000.

Life expectancy is 55 years for men and 60 years for women, about 20 years short of the American average. Infant mortality is twice the national average. The suicide rate is 72 percent higher than the national average. Alcoholism is about nine times the national average.

Yet in the face of socio-economic conditions that rival the worst that can be found in the developing world, Cohn said the determination to protect and preserve Native American culture is strong, even in the face of what he characterized as decades of attempts by the federal government to blot it out.

One example of this can be found in the first film on this year's program, "Urban Rez," which explores the controversial legacy of the federal government's Voluntary Relocation Program.

Started in 1952 and run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, it encouraged Indians to move from tribal lands to cities. In return, participants received short-term assistance with housing and job training. About 100,000 people participated, making it the greatest voluntary upheaval of Native Americans in the 20th century.

During the 57-minute documentary, made for public television last year, dozens of American Indians representing tribal groups from across the West recall their firsthand experiences with relocation, including the early hardships: isolation and racism. Interviewees also speak about the challenges of maintaining one's own tribal traditions — from language to hunting — while assimilating into the larger society.

Actor, musician, and Oglala Lakota member Moses Brings Plenty narrates this insightful film about this seldom-told chapter in American history, which only ended in 1973.

"That wasn't all that long ago," said Cohn. "['Urban Rez'] is a really powerful film, and this is the first time it's been shown in New England."

The other film on the bill is "Pow Wow Highway," a 1989 comedy-drama road movie that won the Filmmakers Trophy at the Sundance Film Festival and Best Picture, Director, and Actor awards at the Native American Film Festival.

"It was Gary Farmer's first big movie, and we're all big Gary Farmer fans," Cohn said.

Farmer, a veteran First Nations character actor with more than 100 film and television credits over the past three decades, was a big part of last year's festival films, "Smoke Signals" and "Skins."

Sandwiched between these two films is a Native American meal featuring foods and recipes from Pine Ridge, including "Grandma Connie's Buffalo Feast," "Blueberry Wojopi" (a pudding of mashed, cooked berries), "Three Sisters Vegetables" (maize, beans, and squash — three traditional staples of the Native American garden), Sioux Indian Pudding, and fry bread, a cousin of the fried dough you'd see at a fair, but has as many variations in its recipes as there are tribes in North America.

This year's meal will be prepared by by local chefs Steven Reynolds and Tristen Toleno.

"The food is going to be great," said Cohn. "The recipes are authentic, and they've found as many local ingredients as possible, including grass-fed buffalo."

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Tickets for the fifth annual International Film and Food Festival are \$25 per person, and are available at the door and at Vermont Artisans in Brattleboro. For more information, visit the Rotary Club at [www.brattlebororotaryclub.org](http://www.brattlebororotaryclub.org).

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