The Minnesota American Indian Institute for Alcohol and Drug Studies Conference

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The 2015 Minnesota American Indian Institute for Alcohol and Drug Studies (MAIIADS) conference was held at the Fond Du Lac Tribal and Community College. The mission of the conference is to “provide education on alcohol and drug abuse that addresses the total well-being of the American Indian individual, family and community that is sensitive to cultural healing traditions,” according to its website.

It is a conference that, by design, teaches those attending from the moment they join the crowd at breakfast to the moment they return from the night’s social event. I learned that slowly the original stewards of Turtle Island [editor’s note: Turtle Island is the name some aboriginal groups use to refer to North America] are gathering and returning to their spiritual and cultural practices and that they are a beautiful people with a rich 10,000 year history.

In healing a person that is living in addiction it is vital to meet that person where they are in life. As a future clinician, I must meet American Indian patients at the real cross roads of their addiction, and that means I must face the realities of American history. We killed off millions of American Indians to build our empire. We spiritually tortured them, denied them dignity and respect, and abused their trust and kindness. That is fact.

However, American Indian culture has not been killed off, despite attempts to completely destroy it. Some of the most important distinctions of their culture stood out at the conference.

Some American Indian cultures refer to lesbian gay, bisexual and transgender members of the community as “two-spirited.” These people are honored community members. They possess both female and male spiritual ideals. There are over 150 scholarly reports and articles documenting ancient and modern histories that attest to the way of the two-spirited.

Another important fact of the culture is that the role and stature of the female is revered, as the female possess the gift of creation and brings stability and consistency to the community.

American Indians have commonly adopted others into their families, much like the people of Latin and African cultures.

Lastly, of great importance, the American Indian people historically have embraced people that are different than they are. Additionally, they are talented in learning and implementing new healing methods; a recent example is the practice of the ancient art of Reiki adapted to the American Indian way of life.

As a soon-to-be licensed alcohol and drug counselor, it is vital to be diverse in my methods. It is even more important to be willing to learn the multiple facets of other cultures.

While I was at the conference, privilege was not discussed at all; however, it was obvious that I benefit from an easy go at life. It is time that the impact of the everyday white American life be recognized as what it is, an exercise of privilege, whether known or not. It’s time that those of us who are enlightened to the facts of privilege teach by example. It is going to be increasingly important, as the truth of our nation’s past needs to be known by its entire people.

Justice can only be served in the presence of truth; hopefully that American dream can be attained through new friendships with the true stewards of our land.