

Essi Wundeman, 1st Place, 11th Grade, Washington-Lee High School

My Name is America

I found my passions tucked between brown grass meadows and an endless sky. I spent my summer on the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation, embracing a vibrant way of life. Every day, I exhausted myself physically—pouring concrete, carrying woodpiles, playing with hordes of children. But in those long days, I was utterly at peace with myself, with my new friends, and with the spinning of the earth beneath my feet. I had found a place that made me feel alive.

However, while I was absolutely in love with the Northern Cheyenne Reservation, I was horrified with it at the same time. It was a food desert, with no access to fresh fruits and vegetables. Stray dogs roamed the streets, their ribs protruding from their mangy fur. Children were growing up in abusive homes, with parents who started drinking at sunrise. Employment opportunities seemed virtually nonexistent and 87% of people on the reservation were living beneath the poverty line. It was astonishing to think that this was happening in America, a country that touts itself as the land of opportunity, a place of equality, where everyone has a chance to succeed. In Arlington, those claims didn't seem far from the truth. But in rural Montana, in a land full of people who have been exploited for centuries, justice seemed out of reach.

Reservations are hidden enclaves of American shame. We have folded people into the land, left them there to struggle, veered highways and cities away from their homes to keep their suffering invisible, to build the facade of a happy country, more developed than the rest of the world. At its very core, America is a country full of trampled land and exploited people. I cannot sit silently back and wait for my country to change; I am my country, and I will enact change with my voice.