

Protecting Our Land Summer Camp: A College Mentor's Perspective

By: John Gallo



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Over my collegiate career, the Protecting Our Land camp was by far the most impactful weekend I ever had. After leaving the campsite instilled with faith in the youth, I found myself empowered and spiritually impacted.

With little time to prepare, the sound of crashing waves running through my mind, and the incredible stress from taking the GRE within a week, I showed up to the camp without any expectations as to what the weekend was to hold. After an orientation with the other college mentors, there was a clear intention for the activities that were planned, and a sense of deep care. It was apparent that the leadership team had experiences with programming and developing youth, and their dedication resonated through the entire team.

This team was unique and composed of several very interesting individuals with a spectrum of experiences and upbringings. Along with the experienced and knowledgeable leaders, three of the college mentors were strong women with a very intact cultural understanding. This group alone was influential enough to create an amazing experience for the campers, and I was able to add to these individuals by being an understanding, relaxed, and diverse college mentor. These Native American youth were able to relate to an individual that was raised in a western emphasis and had not been able to establish a cultural and spiritual sense of being until later in life. With the combination of the individuals in the group, we were able to create a dynamic that catered to the individual differences in the youth.

From my perspective, the first day of the weekend was filled with the regular embarrassing introductions and icebreakers, and most of the relationships were established in the individual groups that were assigned. I quickly realized that everyone in my team, later to be known as Skoden, was a well behaved, motivated, and respectful individual, that came to the camp to have a retreat in the woods with their peers, or to develop their advocacy skills. With many of these individuals being quite advanced in their empathy, knowledge, and personal thoughts, my role changed to be less of a facilitator and more of an emotional supporter. Therefore, many of the activities integrated additional time for the individuals to open up about anything that needed attention, and any of the upcoming concerns that they had regarding the camp, school, future educational opportunities (college) or life in general. Without the flexibility that the leadership team instilled in the college mentors, many of these individuals would not have been able to ask questions or reflect actively amongst personal perspectives, and therefore the experience would have been completely different.

Throughout the progression of the week, it was amazing to see the personalities and relationships of the youth grow. Being the only male college mentor gave me an interesting dynamic amongst the other males. Being a short and rather young-looking college kid left several high schoolers towering over me in height, weight, and facial hair. As we experienced different activities, walks and talking circles, many of the other males began to open up, but much of the interactions revolved around preparations for the future, especially regarding post-graduate paths that involve vocational or military training. These young men are strong, and capable of tackling any obstacle in their path, and it was a fresh breath of air to see individuals excited for what the future holds, and what it means to be a Native American male in an ever-evolving society.



John (right) and fellow college mentor Sara Johantoberns (left)

Taking together these experiences, I have been able to translate many of the lessons that I have learned into my future career as a School Psychologist. With a goal to create effective and culturally relevant interventions to propel children through their educational career, I now understand the impact of active reflection and mindfulness-based activities to aid Indigenous students. After seeing how talking circles and journaling transformed several of these youth by helping with peer connection and emotional recognition, I am excited to incorporate these practices within an educational setting. Without the Protecting Our Land camp, I would have missed out on an educational experience, therefore my professional behaviors in research and clinical practice would have not developed in this manner.

Overall, my experience with the Protecting Our Land camp not only encouraged me to continue interacting and motivating Native American youth, but it also provided a new perspective of faith and confidence within a younger generation. This weekend also opened me up to several interests within my future field of work and provided a new perspective on potential interventions to help youth excel in school systems. I would recommend that any individual volunteer for this experience as a college mentor, as the entire experience can be summed up in two words; life changing.

- John Gallo (Comanche)



Protecting Our Land Summer Camp 2018 Cohort

Photos by: Nicholas Wilson



College mentor Sara Johantobers with her mentees



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