Media Representation of Native Americans

By Malyse Uwase’13

Doctor John Sanchez’s presentation focused on how the media frames the culture of American Indians, and how that affects American Indians daily. Doctor Sanchez was very friendly with the audience, interacting with them at different levels during his lecture. He was interested in what the audience knew, and often asked questions, in order to demonstrate the negative impact of the media’s representation of American Indians. Furthermore his talk was insightful because he based it on personal stories and anecdotes about him, his family and friends. These stories helped illustrate better the realities of American Indians that are more complex than we usually know.

It is clear that the media generally stereotypes American Indians negatively. When Sanchez asked members of the audience what is the first thing that comes to their mind, when they think about American Indians, these were some of the answers: “casinos”, “feathers”, “horses”, and “long hair”. Basing himself on our answers, Doctor Sanchez revealed that most of us have trouble imagining American Indians in a 21st century setting. He was right unfortunately because we could not come up with answers such as lawyers, doctors, or college students, answers that simply showed that we imagined Indians as part of the everyday life that we know.

Most of us were stuck on the images we are used to seeing on television, so basically Indians in western movies or if in recent movies as casino owners. This poses a problem because the images we are given don’t illustrate the reality, and they keep us from knowing American Indians and their cultures. We are constantly given a negative portrayal of American Indians, and we end up always imagining them that way. The truth as Doctor Sanchez argued is that American Indians like any other group of people are diverse, there are many American Indians with different occupations in life, different political beliefs and so much more.

Not only are they diverse but they are also a population that struggles to hold on to their traditions, while trying to fit in the mainstream environment they live in. The latter misunderstands their culture, and is a place of constant struggle for American Indians. This tug of war has a big impact on many American Indians while growing up, and it is a major contributor of drop outs when it comes to studies. Indeed when American Indians start going to school, their teachers are unfamiliar with their traditions, the other students even more, which at times drives them to tease or bully American Indian students. In addition American Indians have many languages, a fact that is seldom recognized, and they don’t have the option to learn these languages while going to school. The mainstream world does not send American Indians a positive message about their culture and traditions. This results in a high number of drop outs from American Indians, who then join the army or do other vocational jobs with a smaller income. Sadly there is also a higher rate of suicide among American Indian teens. All of this illustrates the necessity to change the media’s representation of American Indians, and consequently the general public’s understanding. The lesson to take from Doctor’s Sanchez’s lecture is to challenge what we see in the media on American Indians, as well as educate ourselves and understand this group better. This will help us open our eyes and see the richness of their cultures and move beyond the usual stereotyping.
Interview with Ana Aguilera Silva, creator of ‘This is Me’ Project by Kunga Chodar Dagpo.

1. What inspired you to make the project?

What inspired me to make this project was when I realized that we have so many organizations on campus that excel at bringing out every individual’s uniqueness and differences that arise due to our sex, gender, race, religion, socio-economic status and sexual orientation, among others, yet we lack of events that strive to bring us together as a whole. The idea of the project is to show that regardless of who you are and what you have experienced you can relate to other individuals just because we are all humans.

2. How did you proceed in making it happen?

Although the idea about this project came to me at the start of my Freshman Year, it was not until a month before Summer break when it actually started materializing. I first started shaping the project under the guidance of Dorsey Spencer (former Assistant Director of the CAP Center) with whom I developed the paperwork, and from then on, I started contacting professors who would be enthusiastic to help and connect me to others that would be glad to help and so on. I am really grateful with all the support I have received throughout the whole project. It is still overwhelming to know how many faculty and staff members are moved by the project's goals and supported me to make it happen. The heart and soul of the project though was the personal stories that people were willing to share and how the performers brought the stories vividly to the audience. It was really moving to see how everything fell into place and the project became greater than what I had first imagined.

3. What were the challenges that you encountered?

The main challenge to the project was time commitment. As I mentioned earlier, the project started a month before finals and the final performance had to take place by the first weekend of November. This kind of pressure was a challenge for us at some point while it also became an initiative to push harder to create a better performance. Also, because such a project was a first of a kind led solely by students, there was nowhere to seek comparisons and share ideas with. This first edition had plenty of mistakes but we learned from these mistakes and it made it even stronger and better. Nevertheless, thanks to the support of all the students and faculty members involved, most of the challenges were overcome and we had a very successful first edition of the "This is Me" Play Project.

4. What message do you hope the audience left with?

The message of the play is that we don’t have to have gone through the same experience as someone else in order to connect with them. We need to appreciate who we are as individuals as well and beings that are part of a larger community. In this case the community that the play project tackles is Bucknell.
This year the Bucknell Africa Student Association held a successful BASA BASH. This is an annual event, with the goal of promoting African cultures through performances and fun activities. On Saturday November 19th, the Terrace room decorated in bright colors was filled with people eating good food, smiling, interacting with each other whether sitting or standing up, and learning about the African continent in an interactive and riveting way.

There were many activities prepared for the audience to indulge in before the performances started such as henna tattoos, hair braiding, bracelet making and face painting. There were also posters highlighting on campus charity organizations working in Africa such as BAP and Yehri Wi cry, and the possibility to donate to them, or taking a WFP test, that allows the WFP that is connected to the fight against hunger in Africa. When it came to performances, the audience followed the two MC’s as they traveled around Africa, interacting with the performers, and having them explain the stories behind their dances. These interactions were entertaining and funny for the audience but also allowed the performances to be educational for the audience in learning different cultural aspects of the African countries. The two MC’s visited four regions of Africa, starting from the South, and moving up to the North passing through the West and East. The southern performances focused on the apartheid time in South Africa, and the hard working conditions of miners from different countries who were forced to work in mines, far away from their families. The Western performance was a monologue taken from the play, ‘Master Harold….and the Boys’ by Athol Fugard. The Ethiopian dance was representative of the eastern region, and belly dancing was the performance that represented the northern region. The performers came from different background as BASA is a group on campus that is there for anyone interested in this continent.
To interested students, look out for the posters to apply to be an International Orientation Assistant. Applications are available online or you can pick them up from the International Student Services in Vedder 125 during office hours (see below for office hours). Applications are due on Thursday, February 09, 2012.

International Student Services || Multicultural Student Services
Vedder 125, Bucknell University, Lewisburg, PA 17837
ph: 570.577.3794, fax: .570.577.3163
Cultural Center Lounge Hours: Monday-Friday, 8:30-4:30, Monday-Thursday, 7pm-10pm