

MARL Class VIII - Session 5 - Itasca, MN

Session five took our MARL (Minnesota Ag Rural Leadership) group to Itasca, MN. Itasca is well-known because it is the headwaters of the mighty Mississippi River. It's crazy to think the Mississippi River has such an unassuming start. As we walked down to the headwaters, we were greeted by some celebratory noise. What we found were some beautiful swans on the open water greeting us with their honking! [IMG 2500](#)

Our first session was about fundraising. I personally am not involved in any fundraising organizations, but the main takeaway from the session is fundraising is all about relationships. It's amazing to think how so much of what we do is about relationships. Technology only moves us so far, but it's people that finish the deal.

One of the more interesting aspects of our Itasca State Park destination was our housing. We stayed in a hostel. And if you don't know what a hostel is, you are not alone. I didn't either. Hostels are very similar to summer camp cabins. Multiple rooms with 3-4 bunk beds with sharing a bathroom and a kitchen. No hotels for us! And being the private person I am, I was really stressing out about this arrangement before I arrived. But in the end, I got through it. Would I want to do it again? Well, let's just say I like hotels.

No bad experiences - just my comfort zone. But one thing that has been a direct result of staying in the hostel is I believe our MARL group is becoming closer. I mean face it, we stayed in one large cabin. We cooked together and we really let ourselves be "ourselves." I really appreciated the informal setting and the connections I made during our "down" time!

On our second day, we visited a lumber company in Bemidji - [Potlach Lumber](#). We all took a tour of the company and realized the lumber industry faces similar problems that farmers face. I heard many of the same concerns we in ag such as decision makers not understanding their industry.

The technology they used was phenomenal. They can scan and analyze each tree that comes in and decide how best to use the tree. Much of their lumber goes to companies like Menards, Home Depot and Loews.

Perhaps our most interesting session was visiting the [Red Lake Indian Reservation](#). This is a first time visit for me and frankly, it left quite an impression. The [Red Lake Indian Reservation](#) is one of only a very few reservations that is closed. A closed Native American reservation is one that does not allow non-tribal people to live on the land within the reservation. People within the reservation do not own land, but instead, have allotments that allow them build and live in houses on the land.

The first thing I noticed was the poverty. It was everywhere.

Our first stop in the reservation was a Catholic church where they warmly greeted us. Attached to the church is an elementary school with about 90+ children. One of the first things they proudly told us is the kids are all reading at grade level. That's a big deal! The Red Lake Indian Reservation high school graduation rate is only 8%. Each step, no matter the size, is significant for them because they know they are heading in the right direction.

The priest, Father Jerry Rogers is a wise, quiet man. He insightfully talked with our group at length about life on the reservation. The general consensus is many of us would have loved to talk with him longer. There is no question that he is committed to the Red Lake people and they truly are lucky to have him.

The culture of the Red Lake Native Americans is special and unique, but poverty is stripping away the Red Lake people's values and culture. Drugs and alcohol abuse is running rampant. 80% of the babies born on the reservation are drug/alcohol babies. They struggle with the family unit because many of the fathers are absent. All I could think about is how can I help? And, yet, despite the dismal conditions, the people of Red Lake are resolute. They are hopeful. They are proud. And they will solve these problems and

They will prevail.

As we traveled through the reservation, we visited a medical center, a greenhouse, a fishery and a food store. I noticed the sheer pride employees showed at each of these businesses.

We ended our trip discussing the issues of the Red Lake Indian Reservation. Many of us pointed out specific action items that we think would help them immensely. Entitlements are not the solution. But again, the Red Lake Native Americans need to be in the driver's seat in deciding how to fix the problems on their reservation.

This trip will be forever etched in my mind.

We have a couple month break from MARL. We meet in Duluth in June where we will find out where our international trip will be. Everyone is excited and guessing where we will be going! Until June . . .