

# UnLearning My Bias

## A Teacher Learns from Her Students

Courtney Nilson

**BEFORE YOU READ:** What is bias? How would you define it? Share a time you felt a bias. Have you overcome your bias? If so, how?

### A Bias Begins

I am not Native American, but I grew up close to a reservation in North Dakota. My high school was in the same league as the tribal school. We did not like playing Four Winds High School because we were always told, “Indians are good, fast ball players, but they are also scrappy and mean, and they cheat. Your tires will be slashed if you beat them.” Later, when I went to college, I had a roommate who also grew up near a reservation. She told me she had to leave for her hometown by a certain time, because it was too dangerous to drive through the “rez” at dark. “And no matter what,” she added, “I never stop there for anything.” We

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**[She said] it was too dangerous to drive through the “rez” at night.**

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getting the perspective of someone from the reservation who knew what it was really like. This pattern created a bias in me.

Later, when I was in college, I applied for a summer job. I could choose an urban or rural location, or a reservation. I remember the interviewer asking me where I would prefer to go, and I said, “Probably rural or a city. I grew up by a ‘rez,’ and I do not think I should go there.” My bias – still totally unfounded – was fully evident.

Fast forward through my college years, and I fell in love with family sciences and human development. My goal was that I just wanted to help

non-Native Americans were told all sorts of things, and we believed them without ever



The author, Courtney Nilson (right), with her students. She is a teacher at the FACE Enemy Swim Day School in Waubay, SD. She grew up on a farm in northeastern North Dakota, an hour and a half east of the Spirit Lake Reservation. She went to college at North Dakota State University and has been working at Enemy Swim Day School for a year and a half.

families in rural America by working in a job that provided services – like childcare or other kinds of assistance. I was a new, naive graduate, and I had grand ideas about what I could do.

### Bias Turns Upside Down

After all my fears about living on or near a reservation, I moved to be closer to my boyfriend, and it brought me right next to the Lake Traverse Reservation where I got hired to teach adult education. One year later, I am still teaching, and my bias has turned upside down and rolled straight out the door!

In the classroom, I got to know my students, and I grew to love them. They are mostly from the *Oceti*

**Punctuation Tip:**  
Study in detail how the author uses double and single quotation marks. Describe what you see.

*Sakowin* nation (also known as the Great Sioux Nation). I began to respect their culture, which is so alive in this part of North and South Dakota. My students accepted me. I wasn't just another white person to them, and they weren't just "Indians" to me. We were a family. Most days, I am the student as I learn about Dakota culture. For example, the Dakota people feel a strong pull to protect and care for each one of their *mitakuyapi* (family/relatives). And I am learning some of their words, such as *koda* (friend.) Ironically, this is the same world that I was scared of when I was young. And now here I am, embedded in this world, and learning so much from the people and the culture. Funny how that works.

## Beyond Bias

What is hard now is explaining my perspective to my friends and family who haven't spent time with the people on the "rez." Notice I say *people* because that is what a reservation consists of! It's not just a triangle full of drugs and abuse; it's a triangle full of families, homes and beautiful lakes with names like Enemy Swim, and Buffalo Lake.

Sure, it has its problems – every place does. But what I see in my students is hope, resiliency, and a desire to do better for the generations that follow. I see recovery from addiction and babies being born and children laughing. I see the hard times, but I also see why the hard times happen. It has only been a generation or two since white people forcibly removed Sioux children from their families and took them to boarding schools, where they were punished for not speaking English. These kidnappings caused trauma that has been passed down to successive generations.

My students always joke about what my Indian name should be since, as they say, "You're one of us now." Me, the girl who did not think she should be on a reservation, now counts the reservation as one of the most important places in her life! How could I ever go back to the way I was before I came to know the great *Oceti Sakowin*? They have helped me become a better person who can see beyond the stereotype to the real people.

## Examine Your Unconscious Bias



**Try this activity:** "The Trusted 10." Teachers, you can find the activity here: <[dramatictrainingsolutions.com/unconscious-bias-3-great-exercises-to-use-in-your-training](http://dramatictrainingsolutions.com/unconscious-bias-3-great-exercises-to-use-in-your-training)>. Visit our website to download the handout and the instructions.

**Watch this video:** (2.5 mins) <[tinyurl.com/explorebias](http://tinyurl.com/explorebias)>.

**Take this test:** <[implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html](http://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html)>.

**Think about it further:** What could be helpful and positive about biases? How could biases be unhelpful and limiting? Note: bias and discrimination are different. Discuss the difference. If you're not sure how they are different, look them up.

**Discrimination is illegal** under certain circumstances. Can you name a few? Have you experienced or witnessed discrimination? What did you do about it? What could you do about it?