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UW-Stout's Mary Kate Mahmood, center, organizes a sack race for Enemy Swim Day School students on the last day of the 2014-15 school year. Fourteen UW-Stout students spent 11 days recently working with the school's Dakota students at the Lake Traverse Reservation in Waubay, S.D.

On Campus, Page 1C
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Students give, receive while mentoring at tribal school

By UW-Stout News Bureau

MENOMONIE — Manny Melendrez and Autumn Paulson are Native Americans, but they're from small towns in Wisconsin and didn't grow up in tribal communities.

Still, they had been exposed to and were well aware of the often intimidating social and economic challenges of reservation life.

At least that's what they thought. The reality of the other Native American world beyond their own, especially the impact it has on children, became much more real recently to Melendrez, Paulson and 12 other UW-Stout students.

In June they completed an early summer course called Native American Service Learning Project. Students traveled to Waubay, S.D., where they spent 11 days working with Dakota children at Enemy Swim Day School, a rural Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate tribal school on the Lake Traverse Reservation.

The reservation is in northeastern South Dakota and extends into North Dakota.

The goal of the project was to help educate children about the value of staying in school, at least through high school.

The benefits of the university course and service project, however, went beyond the college

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students trying to change children's lives. "I felt happy knowing we came in here and made a big difference," Melendrez said. "They made a big difference with us too."

Paulson agreed. "That's what this project is doing — opening their eyes as well as ours," she said.

The course was led by Crystal Aschenbrener, an assistant professor of social work in the social science department.

It was her sixth trip to Enemy Swim Day School, the other five coming while she taught at South Dakota State University and UW-Whitewater.

The UW-Stout students included a mix of majors, including vocational rehabilitation; human development and family studies; and psychology, with most having a social work focus.

Before the trip, students studied Native American culture and planned the trip's activities. Afterward, they wrote a final term paper.

"The UW-Stout students are a really impressive group," Aschenbrener said. "For both college students and youth, the service-learning trip is a lifechanging experience."

Making friends

Although the high school dropout rate among Native Americans in South Dakota is about two-thirds, all eight of the middle school children from the first year of the program graduated from high school, defying the odds.

"That's our goal," Aschenbrener said.

Some UW-Stout students worked at Enemy Swim with high school students, but Melendrez, Paulson and others mentored the target group: seventh- and eighth-graders.

"With at-risk youth you need to start well before high school," Aschenbrener said.

Enemy Swim students in the project learn about the value of staying in school and how to cope with issues on the reservation that become roadblocks: alcohol, drugs, teenage pregnancy, dropping out of high school, suicide and poverty.

By the end of the trip, Enemy Swim students begin to see new possibilities for themselves and have a new set of friends and mentors they admire.

"Day by day, our students break things down and build that relationship. By the end it's a pretty powerful thing," Aschenbrener said.

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Helping kids

UW-Stout students led educational activities throughout the project.

They also ate breakfast and lunch with Enemy Swim students, took them to a career day and college visit at a nearby city, Watertown, S.D., and rode the bus home with them.

“We knew deep down there are problems at home they have to go through, and going to school and seeing us made their day 100 times better,” Paulson said.

Paulson is a junior majoring in vocational rehabilitation with concentrations in counseling and social work. She grew up in Lodi, north of Madison, and is part Oneida.

Melendrez is a senior majoring in vocational rehabilitation with social work and criminal justice concentrations. He is from Fairchild and graduated from Osseo-Fairchild High School in 2011.

A member of the Crow tribe, he lived in Oakland, Calif., until age 12 and has family members who live on the Crow reservation in Montana.

Having experienced drug, alcohol and gang problems within his family, Melendrez was able to connect with Enemy Swim students, especially one seventh-grader.

“The final goodbye, he got emotional. I gave him words of encouragement and reminded him he could do it and told him to strive to be the best,” Melendrez said.

Melendrez said he may return to Oakland with his degree in 2016 to work with at-risk youth.

Paulson also would like to work with children like those at Enemy Swim.

“This was probably the best experience I’ve ever done, and (this is) the path I want to take. I want to work on a reservation,” Paulson said.

Melendrez and Paulson are research assistants for Aschenbrener, who would like to teach the course annually. The 14 UW-Stout students were chosen from a pool of applicants.