

## Have a Story to Tell ... By Ron Williams

*Ron is a member of the Committee on Native American Ministries for the Eastern PA Conference of the UMC and of Southern Ute/Apache/Mexican and Welsh heritage. Over the past several years, he and his wife Mary began a project that makes regular trips with food and other items to support families who belong to the Oglala Lakota Nation in the town of Wanblee, South Dakota, on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. The town of Wanblee sits at the easternmost region The Badlands, which make up a substantial part of the northernmost region of the reservation. Wanblee supports approximately 150 housing units, with occupancies ranging from five upwards to a dozen or more. The Wanblee market, not much more than a convenience store, is the only market servicing this community of about 700 to 800. Ron took the photographs accompanying the article from an earlier trip in 2020.*

I have a story to tell, and I do not know if I will be able to tell it very well, but I know that I must do the best that I can, so here it is:



In the winter of 2015, I found myself traveling to Wanblee, South Dakota in order to deliver supplies in support of the “Standing Rock Dakota Access Pipeline Resistance” encampment.

My first impression of Wanblee was that it had to be a difficult place to call home.

Many of the homes are in need of repair, the roads outside of the community are not well maintained, if at all, and there are very few services available to residents. Stores are nonexistent for the most part, and basic needs, such as groceries, are not easily accessible, (outside of a local convenience type store the nearest



grocery store is easily a two-hour trip). The need for food is great. Winters are harsh and punishing. During the school year many families will send their children to live with families near the school or near the school bus routes, and those homes receiving these children can increase in sizes of over a dozen per household.

## Have a Story to Tell ... By Ron Williams

The need for food, bedding and blankets, clothing and personal care items is overwhelming. This is some of what I have become aware of as a result of my discussions with my friends at the reservation.

Wanblee is not the only community on the reservation suffering these conditions. Pine Ridge Indian Reservation is home to some of the poorest communities and the lowest per capita income in the United States. Unemployment and poverty rates exceed 80%. There are few jobs to be had. Health and welfare resources are few and difficult to access. The rate of health-related diseases such as asthma, heart disease, diabetes and dietary related conditions exceeds national averages.

Since my first trip to Wanblee, I decided to do something to help in some way and I have made numerous trips to the reservation in order to deliver donated provisions of food, clothing, necessities, and gift items.

In November 2021, Mary and I delivered a trailer-load of provisions to the reservation, and we were asked if we could get some furniture for a family in need. I made a second trip early in December and was given a broader understanding of that request. There is a family who live in what is referred to as the country, (areas barely accessible within the reservation), whose father had recently passed. The mother had abandoned the family and the family now consists of an eighteen-year-old boy and his six younger siblings. The boy is determined to keep the family together. The place that they live in has no furnishings or kitchen. It is a shack, but the boy is determined to make it a home. Our contacts in Pine Ridge want to help and I am asking for your help. There is another family who lost their home to fire recently and are in need of help as well. I am not sure where we go from here, but I know that we will do all we can to help.

The bottom line is that we believe that we can provide most of the furnishings to fill a decent sized truck with donated furniture, but the cost of a truck rental and fuel for the trip is not cheap. We need help to raise the funds to make this trip, so I am setting up a GoFundMe page at <https://gofund.me/6f80233b> and I ask you to share this story as much as possible. Winter has already set in in the Dakotas and we want to try to get as much relief as we can possibly gather as early as possible.

## ■ Have a Story to Tell ... By Ron Williams

We will also be gathering more food, diapers, and winter clothing for the trip when we have the funds. Please know that Mary and I are grateful for any support you can offer to help us meet our goal. Thank you.

These trips are ongoing so if you or your local church want to continue to support Ron and Mary's efforts, please reach out at [wronaldw@comcast.net](mailto:wronaldw@comcast.net). In an earlier interview Ron shared with Suzanne Wenonah Duchesne, a member of our NEJNAMC Communications Team, "The one item that I am continually asked for is DIAPERS... These are not inexpensive items, to my surprise, and I try as much as I can to send them, but, like food, they just seem to use them up, and there are a lot of children. One of the saddest things I observed during my last visit was a mother putting an obviously soiled diaper on her child, and it is not unusual to see a child walking around with no such protection." These stories are far more common than we may realize or want to admit and Ron's efforts with the contributions of members and friends of The United Methodist Church can make a difference!