

8B Vermillion Plain Talk

‘Sober Indian, Dangerous Indian’ documentary raising awareness of bleak alcohol situation

By Sarah Wetzel
For the Plain Talk

A screening was held on USD campus last Friday for a new documentary titled “Sober Indian Dangerous Indian: A Story of Empowerment through Sobriety.”

The film highlights the issue of alcoholism, its effects on the Pine Ridge Reservation and the part played by the beer vendors in Whiteclay, Nebraska, specifically focusing on four individuals.

“There’s hundreds of thousands of lives lost because of the alcohol and the predatory sale practices,” said John Maisch, director.

According to the film, Whiteclay Nebraska, population 12, consists of four convenience stores which sell approximately four million cans of beer per year. Over 85% of families on the reservation are impacted by alcohol abuse and there is only one seven-bed inpatient treatment facility.

“As we speak, right this moment some family is terrorized because of some drunk fool who procured alcohol this afternoon in Whiteclay, Nebraska,” said Frank LaMere, Native American activist in the question/answer session following the screening. “That’s the reality of this. John Maisch has shown us the ugliness of Whiteclay.”

Maisch is a Nebraska native and current resident of Oklahoma.

“The topic was really of interest to me because I served as a regulator as an assistant Attorney General for the state of Oklahoma in the late 90’s then I served as a prosecutor for the Oklahoma liquor control board for five years,” Maisch said.

“It was at a conference in 2012 that somebody said ‘What do you think about Whiteclay since you’re from Nebraska? You’re a liquor regulator, you have to have an opinion.’ I said I don’t know anything about it.”

According to Maisch, he quickly formed a personal connection with the issue.

“In a six month period I learned about Whiteclay,

my son was born and my mother was struck with a terrible illness,” he said. “I was really able to see the circle of life and how fragile it really is so that’s why Whiteclay really hit home to me.”

Maisch said the fact that there are many who do not know of the issue is the reason he chose to make the film, though he recognized that many in the audience at USD last Friday are familiar with the subject.

“I wanted to tell the story of Whiteclay to people who aren’t as close to it,” he said. “I was at Stanford law school six months ago and very few people had any idea of what’s going on. You know about the issue. Many of you have lived with the issue. This is very personal to you.”

Maisch stated in the question/answer session that he is well aware of the negative effects a documentary of this nature may have but hopes for the best reaction.

“I hope that this will be treated in a respectful way,” he said. “I know that’s a fine line. I know that you run the risk, when you’re raising public awareness, not crossing the line to where you exploit people and their suffering and I think we worked really hard not to.”

Maisch said he and his film crew took steps to make sure they did not step on anyone’s toes.

“We were able to get consents from everyone that we filmed,” he said. “I made a commitment that, especially for these four, I’d go back two months later and see where they were at and if they weren’t sober or more sober, their stories wouldn’t be told.

Fortunately they were a lot better off than when I first was there. So I feel good about that. I can tell their story and hopefully raise awareness.”

The film also includes some scenes where Maisch confronts the beer vendors and taped their reaction. Though the faces of the shop owners were blurred out, they unanimously seemed to react with animosity towards Maisch even when he requested to purchase beer.

“In that scene you have a white regulator looking at a white community member and saying, ‘What you’re doing is wrong.’” Maisch said. “I’m probably the only person that’s ever been declined a beer sale.”

Maisch and LaMere both addressed the big question on everybody’s mind Friday night: what can be done?

“When we have gatherings like this people ask ‘what can I do?’ like there’s a magic formula,” LaMere said. “If there was, it would be done. I don’t know what you can do. John Maisch knows what he can do. I know what I can do. You know what you can do. And I think each and every one of you can do a lot. That’s a message I always want to share.”

“As a regulator we’re always searching for answers of what can we do,” Maisch said. “Whiteclay certainly presents a challenge for all of us.”

Multiple governmental remedies were suggested, including putting pressure on the Budweiser company which accounts for 70% of the beer that is sold in Whiteclay.

Maisch also pointed out that a difference can be made by young college students like those in the audience Friday night.

“There’s groups like young men and women down at Creighton who are starting to put pressure on their administration, Creighton University to reexamine its relationship with that brewery and with those distributors.”

This is exactly what LaMere said his college-age daughter was involved in before her death in January of this year. The documentary is dedicated to her.

“She would have graduated from Creighton university in May,” LaMere said. “We lost her to Leukemia. She was very able and at the age of 19 she went before the administration at Creighton University and said ‘What’s the matter with you that we would enter into agreements with these beer distributors?’ That was very bold of her. I don’t know what you can do, but like

her you just do what you can.”

LaMere spoke of a time driving through Whiteclay with a relative.

“We drove through very slowly and I said very simply ‘somebody ought to do something about this.’” LaMere recounted. “My relative who was driving said ‘You should know better than that, nobody gives a [care]. If you want to do something about it, you’ve got to do it yourself.’”

Other experience has taught LaMere a similar lesson.

“I talked to your new US senator a couple of years ago,” he said. “I asked him ‘What are you going to do about Whiteclay, Governor?’ And he said ‘I’ll leave that to my good friend Governor Heineman.’ In other words nothing was going to happen.”

According to LaMere, one big reason nothing is being done is, unfortunately, simple racism.

“If they had to look at the ugliness in downtown Vermillion, SD that happens tonight in Whiteclay Nebraska or the violence or the things that happen there, they would shut the thing down tomorrow morning,” he said.

“Now that is less than charitable but I have seen it. We’re dealing with issues of economics, we’re dealing with issues of race. We cannot deny that as much as we would like to.”

Though the outlook is bleak, Maisch and LaMere remain positive.

“Student activism and citizen activism can work so we’re optimistic,” Maisch said. “Wouldn’t it be amazing in a year or two years that we come back and see this emerging native american studies program at the University of South Dakota? And we can celebrate it along with that Whiteclay is shut down once and for all.”

For more information on the documentary and its cause, visit www.soberindian.com.

Sober Indian, Dangerous Indian: Review: A story of empowerment through sobriety?

By Sarah Wetzel with contributions by Zach Wetzel
For the Plain Talk

I can see why this documentary was made. I can see the bleakness of the situation. On the reservation people are suffering, babies are being born with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, domestic abuse is on the rise and there is no access to quality health care. I guess if that was the point of the movie, then it was somewhat of a success. As far as documentaries go, however, this could have been made much better.

The film focused on four Native American alcoholics then showed them two months later and the ways they were changing their life. At least, that’s what the summary told me. Watching the film I honestly did not know what was going on.

I couldn’t understand half the people in the film, but there were subtitles for part of the film but not nearly enough.

There are several aspects that contributed to the lack of drive of the film.

The clips were poorly organized. It didn’t feel like there was a beginning, middle and end. Though the film supposedly focused on four individuals, more people were interviewed so it was not clear who it was about.

The clips would have made a lot more sense if there was some guidance. This film has little sense of that, being purely interviews. There are black screens with short explanations and backstory every once in awhile but not enough to give you a sense a narrative.

Documentaries usually have a narrator like Morgan Freeman guiding and explaining things to the audience between clips. Put Morgan Freeman or someone like him in there and it would have flowed a lot easier.

All the subjects seemed to have the same story as well. It felt like watching an opera where everyone says the same thing twice which makes it twice as long as it needs to be. The message could have more effectively been expressed in more concise terms.

The camera work was also very low quality. I can understand slightly shaky camera and things like that but multiple close-ups of someone’s chin and choppy cuts are not acceptable.

I know the film design was not the point of the documentary, the point was the message they were trying to get across: that alcohol sales need to be shut down in the town. However, the flaws of the film were so distracting, the message did not come through. I was left with feelings of, ‘Well, this is horrible. What now?’

Nothing came to my mind about shutting down the alcohol sales. If this was really the focus of the film, more focus should have been given to the town itself.

In the question-answer session afterwards, Native American activist Frank LaMere said even he does not know what needs to be done.

There is not a formula to follow to fix this problem.

Everyone just needs to get involved in their own way. I understand that. I would not have understood it if I left the theater before the question-answer session. That seems to defeat the purpose of making a movie out of it.

Taking Mr. LaMere’s advice, I believe everyone should use their personal strengths and talents to help resolve this issue. John Maisch, the director, is an attorney not a filmmaker.

Perhaps a better way for him to bring the issue to light would be a speaking tour or something of that nature.

He is a wonderful public speaker, that was clear from the post-film session.

Going into this film, one of my worries was that it would simply highlight a racial stereotype and I was right.

There was little focus on the beauty of Native American culture. It made it look like the future is hopeless for them and nothing will ever change, at least in the large scope of things.

I’m not saying a film like this needs to put rose-colored glasses on and make light of a serious situation, but I came away thinking something was missing and more needed to be said.

For more information on the film and its cause, visit www.soberindian.com.

USD Beacom school honored for reputation

The Princeton Review – known for its widely-followed college rankings in dozens of categories based on how students rate their schools – recently released the 2015 edition of “The Best 296 Business Schools” that features the University of South Dakota Beacom School of Business.

The Beacom School of Business earned praise from The Princeton Review for its value, reputation and flexibility with courses. The

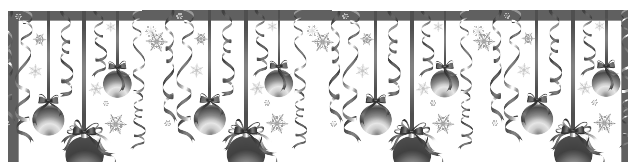
publication says, USD’s Beacom School of Business “has a good orientation program to help potential students familiarize themselves with the program” and has “accessible, high quality professors.”

The Princeton Review tallied its lists based on its surveys of 41,100 students overall attending the schools profiled in the books, including 21,600 students attending the 296 business

schools. The 80-question survey asked students to rate their schools on several

topics and report on their experiences at them.

Courtesy of USD News



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- Rapid City -The Cornerstone Rescue Mission 30 Main Street
- Hot Springs, Veterans Town - RadioShack® 204 S Chicago St.
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