

Breast cancer survivors help build cultural center

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BROWNING — Traveling from as far as Australia, a group of breast cancer survivors spent last week building a cultural center for the De La Salle school and learning Blackfeet culture.

Amazon Heart was founded in 2004 by breast cancer survivors Meredith Campbell and Megan Dwyer, who were looking to provide peer support adventures for women diagnosed with breast cancer.

In the years since, groups of women have rode Harleys across California, England and Australia. They went mountain climbing in New Zealand. And last year they went to Sri Lanka to build homes for poor people.

Their next trip will be to build orphanages in India.

Looking for an interesting and important cause to help in the United States, the women found out about the Blackfeet school from the international Christian De La Salle order.

The 11 women raised \$20,000 before arriving in Montana last week. Using volunteer labor, the total cost for the building should be about \$35,000.

The women spent nine days in the area, including four days working on the cultural studies center.

School President Brother Paul Ackerman said the women worked hard on the flooring, getting the school closer to the goal of having the basic structure built before the first snow.

"I think they're finding that this is something that really helps turn something as tragic as breast cancer into a positive thing in their lives," he said.

The women visited Glacier National Park, hiking to Red Rock Falls. They went to a nearby buffalo jump and toured the Blackfeet Community College.

On two evenings, Eloise Cobell, who launched a lawsuit against the U.S. government claiming Indian trust funds were mismanaged, and Blackfeet historian and community college founder Carol Murray spoke to the group.

As part of the immersion in Blackfeet culture, they spent last weekend camping in teepees with herbalist Pauline Matt and other women historians and artists. Together they gathered herbal medicines and went through a smudging ceremony.

The cancer fund-raising group, Cowboys for Life, cooked meals for the women during their Montana visit.

In its sixth year of operations, the De La Salle school has 64 students in fifth through eighth grades.

The new building will house visiting high school and college students who come to work at the school and study Blackfeet history and culture. It will have enough room for 14 people at a time.

"Amazon Heart's programs bring survivors together and raise awareness of our unique needs to continue along our own personal path of growth and healing by building a supportive community," Campbell said.

To read their daily blog go to <http://ahomt2006.amazonheart.org>.

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