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Crow students march for meth-free life

By **SUSAN OLP**
Of The Gazette Staff

LODGE GRASS - "No more meth! No more meth!" hundreds of Lodge Grass students chanted as they walked through the streets of the reservation town Monday morning.

The students, in kindergarten through 12th grade, all wore white T-shirts with "Meth Free Crowalition" in red letters on the back and the Crow Tribe's emblem on the front.

Monday was the fourth annual "Meth Free Crow - Reclaiming Our Nation" walk through Lodge Grass. It started and ended at Lodge Grass High and wended its way through town, with periodic stops for pep talks and prayers.

The Meth Free Coalition put on the event and planned other activities for students throughout the week.



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March Against Meth



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Four members of the Lodge Grass JROTC squad led the walk, carrying wind-whipped American and Crow Tribe flags. Students carried banners reading "Meth Free Generation" and "Meth Free Crow Coalition, Reclaiming Our Nation."

The rest of the marchers kept pace, chatting with friends, tossing around a football and skateboarding down the road. They passed reminders of the economically depressed community: boarded-up buildings laden with graffiti, old vehicles parked on sidewalks, and abandoned houses - though none of the walkers seemed to notice.

Some of the expletive-laced graffiti was obviously gang-related. That's one sign of methamphetamine's domino effect in Lodge Grass, said April Toineeta, Meth Free Crow Coalition project director, before the walk.

Meth leads to gang activity, she said. The insidious drug also hooks users and wrecks their health, leads to crimes to support the habit, to child neglect and abuse. The solution, she said, includes prevention, intervention, treatment and accountability for drug dealers.

"The purpose of this walk is reclaiming our nation and giving the youth a voice to share their concerns about meth use and meth problems within their own community," Toineeta said. "It's always the younger generation that helps us in this, and I guess they're the true warriors."

The walk began as a grass-roots effort on a shoestring budget. Eighteen months ago, the coalition secured a \$2.5 million five-year grant to sponsor the walk and other activities to combat meth use on the reservation.

Leonard Bends, Crow spiritual leader and Lodge Grass

Meth Free Crow
Coalition's
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High's athletic director, kicked off the walk with a few words to the students before he prayed in the Crow language.

"You students are the future of this reservation," he said. "You're going to be future parents of children who go to school here. We don't want meth in our lives or on our reservation."

Crow hymn singer Darrin Fritzler sang a hymn at the first stop on the walk. At the next stop, Crow legislator Manuel Covers Up Sr. urged the students to take care of themselves and set an example for others.

He was followed by the Rev. Newton Old Crow of the Little Brown Church, who told the students that meth "is killing our people, young people and old - age doesn't matter."

"You can stand up against, it and you can say no," he said. "You don't need it. Be proud of who you are."

The Rev. Jim Antoine, pastor of Our Lady of Loretto Parish, reminded the students that God created their minds and their bodies for a good purpose.

"To do that we need to be free of meth and other drugs in our bodies," he said.

Youth pastor Evan Cummins got a cheer from the crowd when he acknowledged that life on the reservation is hard.

"You can feel sorry for yourselves, or you can take the opportunity to make yourself better, stronger."

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