

# Making the Most of your Powwow Experience



This informational guide and keepsake is dedicated to you, our **thiyóšpaye** — *extended family* — to help you better understand and appreciate the rich and wonderful culture of our Lakota (Sioux) students. Enjoy your time at the powwow. **Philámayaye** — *thank you!*

# Making the Most of your Powwow Experience

from your **thiyóšpaye** — *extended family* — at



**St. Joseph's Indian School**  
We serve and teach, we receive and learn.  
PO Box 326  
Chamberlain, SD 57326  
1-800-341-2235 • [www.stjo.org](http://www.stjo.org)

*Dear Friends,*

**Mitákuyepi, čhaŋtéwašteya napéčhiyuzape lo** – *My relatives, I greet you with a good heart and hand.*

Welcome to all our benefactors and visitors who are on campus to take part in our annual *powwow* – **wačhípi**. We are honored to have you with us. We hope you'll enjoy yourselves as you witness and perhaps join in the expression of culture, history, heritage and celebration associated with **pau-wau**, an Algonquian word referring to a gathering of spiritual leaders. The correct Lakota term for what unfolds this weekend is **wačhípi**, meaning *dance*.



As the powwow begins, you'll see regalia and eagle feathers. You will hear drum beats and songs handed down by elders to younger generations. Each piece helps preserve the culture and keep the circle of life strong.

### **Observe**

Great respect is shown to the *eagle* – **waŋblí** – which brings gifts from the Creator and carries prayers heavenward, back to the Great Spirit. When I attended one of my first powwows, I witnessed just how special an eagle feather is.

During one of the dances at Lower Brule, South Dakota, a feather came loose and hit the ground. Immediately an elder saw what had happened and brought the dance to a complete stop. The dance area was cleared and older dancers along with military veterans came forward to help re-bless the dance area as special songs, prayers and ceremonies were offered to honor the feather. The elder then gathered the younger dancers and reflected on the meaning of the eagle feather and reminded them of the need to show respect. The military veterans helped the elder “rescue” the feather, which is seen as a fallen warrior.

The ceremony reminded me of what happens in the Catholic Church should the host/Blessed Sacrament hit the floor. The Mass is stopped until the host can be picked up and the spot cleaned. This doesn't happen often but it is impressive when you see how an accident is corrected to restore honor to respected objects.

### **Participate**

A powwow is something to take part in – to be part of the dancing and celebration. It is similar to a family reunion with various rituals and traditions, but also fun! At the appropriate time, the announcer will encourage you to come forward and enter into the spirit of the powwow. Enjoy the movement, the sights, colors, drum and songs.

This booklet has been prepared to help you understand, appreciate and participate in the powwow. May it bring joy and strength as it lifts your spirit. We say **philámayaye** – *I thank you* – for being with us this weekend. I hope you'll have many fond memories and bright pictures to take home with you. The students and staff at St. Joseph's Indian School wish you safe travels. You are in our prayers.

Peace and Blessings,

*Fr. Greg*

Fr. Greg Schill, SCJ  
Chaplain

## **Student reflections about dancing at powwows**

*“I feel like I am at home when I dance – dancing helps and makes me feel better.”* – Danielle, 12<sup>th</sup> grade

*“I feel proud to show who I am and honored to express my culture.”* – Shayelyn, 8<sup>th</sup> grade

*“I feel like I am dancing with my family and my ancestors both living and the ones who have passed away.”* – Martina, 5<sup>th</sup> grade

*“I feel like a spirit looking for the way of the Great Spirit.”* – TreShawn, 7<sup>th</sup> grade

*“When I dance in my regalia I feel thankful, lucky, myself and free. I feel that I don’t need to think about anything else but the fact that I need to concentrate and have fun.”* – Kyla, 8<sup>th</sup> grade

*“When I am in my regalia, I feel like I made my tribe and my school proud. I feel honored to dance for my people.”* – Mariah, 7<sup>th</sup> grade

# What is a powwow?

Long ago, the Lakota (Sioux) people would dance to celebrate the coming of spring and their relationship with Mother Earth. Dance was a form of prayer thanking the Great Spirit for another year of life.

Today, *powwow* is a term commonly used to describe many American Indian celebrations in the upper plains and across the U.S. However, this word did not originate with the Lakota/Dakota/Nakota (Sioux). It is derived from the Algonquian Indian word **pau-wau**,

which referred to a gathering of spiritual leaders. In the 1800's, European settlers and explorers observing these religious gatherings and dances mispronounced the word as powwow. Non-Indians began using the term to describe nearly any Native American gathering.

The correct Lakota word for this celebration is **wachípi** (pronounced wah-chee-pee), which means *dance*.

The U.S. outlawed all Native American celebrations and religious ceremonies in the 1890s, so many were practiced in secret until after World War II. At that time, society's attitude was that Native Americans had 'proven themselves loyal Americans' by serving in the Armed Forces. In Sioux country, the powwow originated within warrior societies. Today, a veteran or a group of veterans, known as the Honor Guard, always leads the Grand Entry procession into the powwow arena.





Every powwow is different, but most gatherings are considered either a traditional **wachípi** or the more contemporary powwow contest. Traditional powwows honor groups or individuals. The gatherings are more ceremonial in nature and dancers are gifted a minimal amount of “day money” for their attendance. Contest powwows are typically larger competitive events that provide prize money for dancers. Some contest powwows will pay over a \$1,000 to the winners. Some offer both a contest and honoring ceremonies.



# Men's Dance Styles

## Traditional Dance

The men's traditional style of dance provides an image of past warriors who would return from hunting or battle and tell their story through dance. Some suggest the dancer is tracking prey or sneaking up on the enemy.

The traditional dancer was typically an elder who had earned the right to carry eagle feathers. Today, however, traditional dancers are of all ages. The feathers worn by the dancers are arranged in a single bustle and worn on the lower back. The bustles and other regalia are symbolic of a dancer's relationship with nature and connection to the Great Spirit.

Long ago, veterans carried a shield and lance or coup stick\* to indicate their status as veterans. At today's powwows, elder traditional dancers wear a breastplate and regalia adorned with traditional quillwork or beadwork. Male dancers wear a roach on their head with a white-tail deer tail used to hold up the porcupine or horse hair. Dancers carry a feather fan and, on occasion, a horse effigy dance stick. Songs for this dance are sung at a slower pace and the words reflect the honor traditional dancers feel when asked to protect their people.

*\* Counting coup describes the act of an Indian warrior who sneaks up and touches the enemy without killing him.*



# Men's Traditional Dancer



A shield or coup stick is often carried during the dance. A warrior's vision is painted on the shield.



All male dancers wear bells around their ankles to add elements of interest to the dance. The bells replace the traditional use of animal dew claws.

A single bustle of feathers is worn on the lower back.



The breastplate was traditionally worn in battle for protection. The bones on male breastplates are horizontal while those on female breastplates are vertical.



# Men's Dance Styles

## Fancy Dance

This contemporary dance style is fast, exciting and full of color. The Fancy Dance was introduced during the reservation era when tribes from the southern plains conducted large gatherings for spectators who wanted to witness a war dance. After **mázaska** – *money* – was introduced to the dance circle, the popularity of the

gatherings increased. Dancers made their outfits as colorful and brilliant as possible for entertainment purposes. The young dancers wear a head roach with

two rocker feathers, two bustles on their back and bands on their arms. The dancers carry twirling spinners as they hop, jump, skip and perform acrobatic movements

throughout the dance.

Today, fancy dancers continue to offer spectators a showcase of fancy footsteps to songs that go very fast. The best dancers are able to keep in time to the extremely fast drumbeat and stop on the last beat of the drum.



# Men's Fancy Dancer



The head roach with two rocker feathers symbolizes warriors fighting during the fast-paced dance.



Twirling spinners on the ends of the dance sticks add to the excitement as the dancer hops, skips and performs other fast movements.



Two brightly colored bustles are part of the fancy dancer's regalia.

# Men's Dance Styles

## Grass Dance

The Grass Dance, or Omaha Dance, was originally a ceremonial dance celebrating the people's relationship with Mother Earth. Long ago, grass dancers wore tufts of prairie grass in their belts as they flattened the tall prairie grass where the tipi lodges were erected or where a powwow would take place. Grass dancers were members of the Omaha Society with songs and regalia specific to that group.

Over the years, songs were borrowed by neighboring tribes who continue to celebrate Mother Earth with their dance. Today, the Grass Dance is very popular among younger dancers who wear colorful fringe, yarn or ribbon instead of grass. Dancers try to emulate the movement of the grass blowing in the breeze as they sway from side to side. Good grass dancers are able to keep in time with the drum, flow with the breeze and show balance in their dance routine.



# Men's Grass Dancer

The regalia for a Grass Dancer has almost no feathers. Instead, colorful yarn or ribbon symbolizes the swaying of the prairie grass blowing in the breeze.

This grass dancer wears a cape, breach cloth and arm cuffs.

The Morning Star pattern on his cape is an important symbol to the Lakota people and is often used in designs and decorations. It is the star that stands alone in the sky and shines very brightly in the East, announcing the coming of Sun and light of Earth.



A *head roach* (**waphéša**) is made of horse hair or long porcupine gaurd hair. A white-tail deer tail is used to hold up the porcupine or horse hair.

# Women's Dance Styles

*Women began participating in the dance circle around 1953. Before that time, they were not permitted in the dance arena and stood in the background — usually behind the drums — and sang. Today, women have their own styles of dance and regalia.*

## **Traditional Dance**

Native American women are regarded as the life-giving force that nurtures the next generation of youth. Traditional Dancers wear long, beautiful buckskin or trade cloth dresses adorned with beads, animal teeth, quillwork, shells and ribbon. The female dancers carry a feather fan as they move in a stationary manner on the outside of the circle. Most dancers carry a shawl draped over their arm. During the honor beats\* of the song, they lift their feather fan to show their pride and appreciation for the Creator's blessings.



*\* Honor beats are the stronger, louder and slower beats heard in a song.*

# Women's Traditional Dancer

There are two variations of the Traditional Dance regalia. The contemporary red cloth dress and the more traditional buckskin dress.



Notice how the female breastplate is designed vertically rather than horizontally.



All dancers wear moccasins made of tanned deer or buffalo hide. Some are beaded with the lazy stitch style of beadwork to match their regalia.



A fan made of turkey feathers is carried with honor during the dance.

# Women's Dance Styles

## Fancy Shawl Dance

The first impression people often have of the women's fancy dancers is that of butterflies. Dancers wear decorated shawls that compliment a satin dress and knee-high beaded moccasins or decorated leggings. The decorated shawl is made of cloth and fringe, reminiscent of the decorated buffalo robes worn in the past.

The faster pace of the drum challenges dancers to keep in time with the beat while coordinating their fancy footwork and graceful fashion.

Like the Men's Fancy Dance, this contemporary style of dance was introduced as powwows became more competitive.

*Watch all dancers as they follow the beat of the drum and stop, with both feet on the ground, when the music stops.*

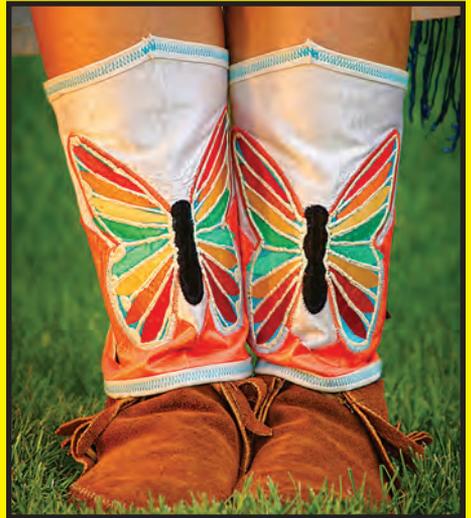


# Women's Fancy Shawl Dancer

Fancy shawl dancers often look like butterflies with the wings of the shawl outstretched during this high-stepping dance.

A cape or vest cape is worn to cover the back of the shawl.

An eagle plume and beaded headband are often worn in the hair. Otter skins are worn on the braids to extend and dramatize the length.



A satin dress and knee high moccasins or decorated leggings are usually worn with this regalia.

# Women's Dance Styles

## Jingle Dress Dance

The Jingle Dress Dance came by way of a holy man's vision. The holy man was providing care for a sick girl when a dream came to him. In his dream, four girls wearing dresses adorned with tiny cones, which made a very distinct sound, danced for the healing of the little girl. Upon his awakening, he instructed his wife in the making of the dresses and found girls to dance. The sick girl was healed!

The Jingle Dress Dance has been around for approximately 100 years. Tribes of the Plains borrowed the dance from the Chippewa tribes of the Great Lakes region. This style of dance is very popular among young female dancers. You can hear these dancers coming from a distance as their many metal cones make a unique jingle sound.



*This beaded headband was made by St. Joseph's students in Native American Studies class.*



# Women's Jingle Dress Dancer

A jingle dress dancer often carries a feather fan like female traditional dancers.



Notice the matching vest and leggings.

Jingle dress dancers can be heard from a distance as the metal cones, masterfully placed on the dress, create a special sound all their own.



# Things to look for at a Powwow

## The Circle

In celebration of the circle of life, the physical structure of the powwow setting is a circle. The symbol of a circle is central to the cultural beliefs of the Lakota. What goes around will come back around. The drum is shaped in a circle and the singers sit in a circle around it. The Powwow ground is formed in a circle with campers and food stands located in a circle around the dance area.

In the circle of life, the elder dancers will pass their regalia and eagle feathers on to the younger generation of dancers. Songs are also handed down in the same manner, preserving the culture and keeping the circle strong.

## Blessing of the Grounds

Long ago, grass dancers would be called upon to flatten the tall prairie grasses where the tipi dwellings were erected. Today, the tradition continues with a ground blessing ceremony held to prepare the arena before Grand Entry. Prayers are offered to thank the Creator for another day of life and for making it possible to gather for another **wachípi**. After the grounds are blessed, spectators are asked to remain outside the dance area unless they are participating in a social dance. Treat the arena with the same respect given to a church. Among the Sioux, it is common practice to enter the arena from the west; however, other tribes may have different protocol.



## The Drum

Central to the dance is the drum, which represents the heartbeat of the people. Most drums are circular in shape and through the drum, people find

unity. The drum is a sacred gift from the Creator, so when people are at the drum, a spiritual respect is observed. The first drums were made of flat, hardened animal hides. Today the drums are made of rawhide wrapped around a wooden shell. The smaller hand drums are carried by individual singers. Drum songs were composed for all purposes and today aid in the preservation of tribal languages.



## **The Grand Entry**

Every powwow begins with a parade of dancers, also known as the Grand Entry. Dancers are led into the dance area by veterans who walk in the footsteps of ancestral warriors. The veterans are honored to carry the American Flag as they lead the way for all of the dancers to follow. The pageantry continues with the royalty and Eagle Staff Bearer who serve as ambassadors of their particular tribe. They're followed by the male traditional dancers and the line continues until all the dancers are in the circle. Most powwows will have an afternoon Grand Entry and then another one to begin the evening session after a supper break.

## The Honor Guard

When men began enlisting in the military, songs were composed to honor our veterans and our country. Today, we stand during the flag song to recognize the sacrifices made by our ancestors and honor the veterans who continue to protect us today.

## The Eagle

The eagle brought dance to keep in time with Mother Earth. For the gifts it brings from the Creator, the eagle is honored because it carries prayers. For these reasons, Plains Indians have great respect for eagle feathers. If an eagle feather is dropped during the powwow, the dance area is cleared. Veteran dancers are called forward and special songs are rendered to retrieve the feather.

## The Eagle Staff and Powwow Royalty

Within many tribal nations of the Plains, there were societies of warriors such as the Kit Fox and Strong Hearts who were referred to as **akíčhita** (Ah-kee-chee-tah). Each society designated a brave warrior to carry a lance or staff that symbolized their allegiance to the group.

Customarily, an eagle feather was presented to warriors



for good deeds or bravery. Today, the Eagle Feather Staff provides a traditional symbol of leadership.

At modern powwows, young ladies are encouraged to take part in pageantry that leads to being selected or crowned as a princess. The criteria for selecting a powwow dignitary is connected to a candidate's knowledge of their culture. Generally, participants explain their reason for wanting to be selected as the princess and sometimes a traditional talent competition is held. The royalty competition promotes practicing good values, traditional lifestyle and healthy choices.

Winners are usually selected by a panel of judges and the newly elected princess is presented with gifts that may include a crown or sash with her title. The Eagle Staff Bearer and the royalty of all nations are recognized during the Grand Entry of every powwow.

## **Wisdom of the Elders**

Tribal elders are respected as keepers of tradition. They are often called upon to render a prayer or teaching during the powwow. Sometimes, a powwow will offer special “senior” categories of dance competition to honor elder dancers. Preferred seating is provided, and efforts are made to ensure elders feel comfortable and welcome. People often show their respect for elders by serving them first, offering assistance, or simply shaking their hand.

Tribal elders are great teachers of the history of song and dance, ceremony, customs and traditions.



## Honoring Ceremonies

On occasion, a request for an honoring is brought to the powwow committee. Once approval is given, the family of the individual being honored will request a drum group to render a special song, which usually incorporates the honored person's traditional name. Honorings can be held for celebrations and memorials. When an honoring is held, spectators should show their respect or support by removing their hats and standing throughout the song.



During the song, the family will dance around the arena and the public will show their support by coming out to shake their hand or dance in the circle with them. Following the song, the family will provide gifts during a give-away, conduct a special dance contest in memory of a dancer, or simply provide a monetary gift for the drum group that offered the song. An **éyapaha** – *spokesperson* – is often designated to speak on behalf of the family or individual.

## Honoring the deceased

When mourning for a deceased loved one, grieving family members will honor that individual by not dancing at a powwow for one year.

## Spirit of generosity

The most common value practiced among Native American people is *generosity* – **wóčhaŋtognake**. The give-away is an example of sharing gifts or good fortune with others. To have many possessions was often thought to be greedy and inappropriate. Long ago, the leaders of the tribe were often the poorest because they placed the needs of the people before their own.

When a person is honored, gifts are shared with others to spread the good feeling amongst the people.

# Powwow Etiquette

Powwow etiquette is simply the use of common courtesy and respect for others. The announcer specifies who is to dance and whether spectators may participate. Alcohol and drug use are strictly prohibited.

When the announcer asks you to stand and remove your hat for an honor song, do so just as you would for the National Anthem.

When a person refers to the items that are carried or worn by dancers, they should be called an outfit or regalia. Dancers dress in a manner that honors the spiritual connection they have with nature and the Great Spirit. Outfits can sometimes take years to acquire. The items are costly and sometimes considered family heirlooms. It is disrespectful to refer to these cherished possessions as a “costume.” Spectators also show their respect for dancers by asking permission before taking their photo or touching any part of their regalia. Politely ask permission if you want to use a camera or recording device. Pictures or recordings should only be used for personal purposes — not commercial.

Most Native Americans are glad to share their culture with those who are genuinely interested. A good way to learn is to find a friendly participant and ask questions. Pay attention to the announcer and to what those people around you are doing, and you’ll have no problems enjoying the powwow!

**Remember, powwows are not only for watching — become a participant and help celebrate the circle of life.**

**Mitákuye Oyás’iŋ —**

***“We Are All Related”***

# Notes and Memories



# Notes and Memories



# Powwow Protocol

- Be respectful – ask permission to take photos or video.
- Always allow elders to go first.
- Honor veterans and dancers by standing during Grand Entry and honor songs.
- The Earth is our Mother, please do not litter.
- Alcoholic beverages, tobacco and pets are never allowed.
- Drive slow, children are usually playing.
- Our culture is alive, powwows are not a re-enactment.
- Obey all laws and enjoy yourself.

## *Lakota Flag Song*

**Ṭḥuŋkášilayapi ṭhawápaha ḳihán  
oíḥaŋkešniyaŋ hé náziŋ kté ló.**

**Iyóḥlatheya oyáte ḳihán  
wičhíčaŋiŋ kta čha, léčhamuŋ weló.**

*The President's flag will stand  
(without end) forever. Under it,  
the people will grow, so I do this.*



**St. Joseph's Indian School**

We serve and teach, we receive and learn.

PO Box 326

Chamberlain, SD 57326

1-800-341-2235 • [www.stjo.org](http://www.stjo.org)