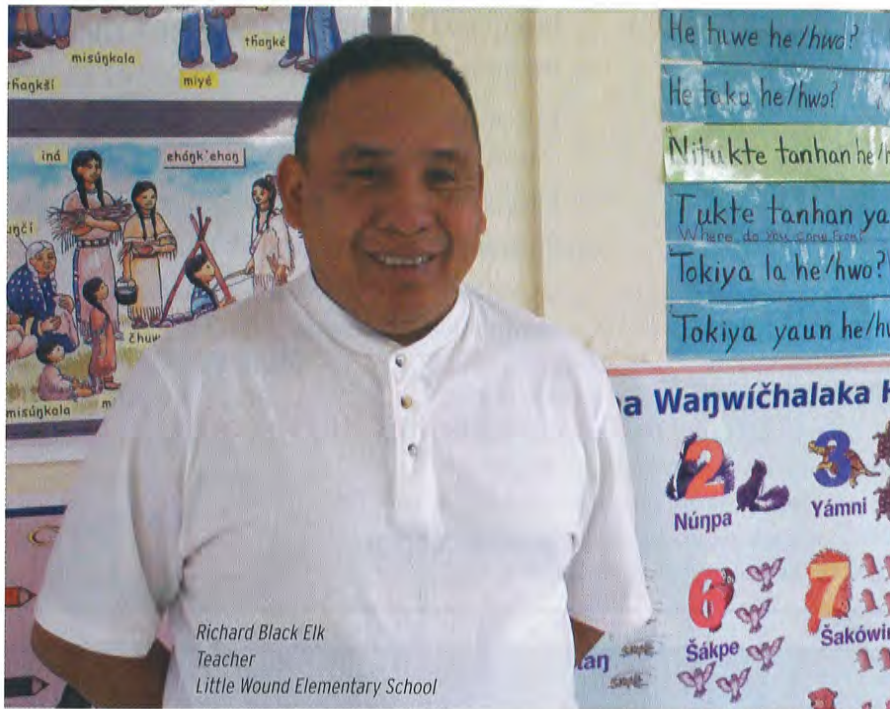


Running Toward a Dream

Guardsman finds career opportunity through Troops to Teachers.

BY WARREN DUFFIE



Richard Black Elk
Teacher
Little Wound Elementary School

Richard Black Elk's career path has been a marathon. But the former All-American long-distance runner maintained a steady course to a rewarding job teaching students at the Little Wound Elementary School on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation.

Located in South Dakota, Pine Ridge is America's eighth-largest Indian reservation, spanning more than a million acres. A rugged yet beautiful patchwork of hills, cliffs, valleys and prairie, Pine Ridge encompasses eight towns and communities, including the famous Wounded Knee. Black Elk's school is in Kyle Village.

ON THE JOB

A staff sergeant in the Army National Guard, Black Elk teaches Lakota (formerly Sioux) language and culture to 200 students from kindergarten to fifth grade. During the first half of the academic year, he focuses on grammar and spelling before moving on to Lakota history and culture.

"I grew up in Wounded Knee and was lucky enough to learn Lakota at home,"

said Black Elk, 45. "It's satisfying to be able to help these students keep a part of their heritage to pass on to future generations."

Black Elk, who became an educator through the Troops to Teachers program, begins his day at 0500. Since he lives 85 miles from his school, he leaves at 0630 to make it to work at 0730. At 0800 he reviews his lesson plan before gather-



THE BLACK ELK FILE

Highest Rank Held:
Staff Sergeant (E-6)

Age:
45

Experience:
3 years active duty, U.S. Army;
9 years, U.S. Army National Guard

CHRONOLOGICAL RÉSUMÉ

2007 - Present
Teacher, Little Wound Elementary School,
Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, South Dakota

1996 - Present
U.S. Army and U.S. Army National Guard
Served in Panama, Washington and Iraq

THE DAILY GRIND

Black Elk begins his day at 0500. Since he lives 85 miles from his school, he leaves at 0630 to make it to work at 0730. At 0800 he reviews his lesson plan before gathering students outside for a prayer, followed by the raising of the American flag - which is accompanied by a traditional drum ceremony and the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance in Lakota.



PROGRAM QUICK STATS

Program: Troops to Teachers

Founded: 1994

Headquarters: Pensacola, Fla.

Web site: www.proudtoserveagain.com

WHAT RICHARD BLACK ELK LIKES ABOUT HIS JOB

- Sharing and teaching the Lakota language.
- Working with my students.
- I work with great colleagues.

DID YOU KNOW?

- Since the Troops to Teachers program began more than 3,000 veterans have become teachers.
- "Thunderheart," a 1992 film starring Val Kilmer, was filmed on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation.

BLACK ELK'S ADVICE:

Take care of yourself before getting out. "Get all your medical appointments done. This is especially true if you were in combat. A lot of the Soldiers in my unit are dealing with PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder]. You want to take care of that as soon as possible."

Plan thoroughly before getting out. "Figure out what you want to do and take all the time you need. There's no need to rush."

ing students outside for a prayer, followed by the raising of the American flag – which is accompanied by a traditional drum ceremony and the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance in Lakota.

"These kids have a passion for learning," said Black Elk. "A lot of them come from poor economic backgrounds, but they're good students and fun to teach."

Thousands of military veterans are transferring the skills they learned in the Armed Forces to serve their country again – as teachers in classrooms across America. With assistance from the Troops to Teachers program, more than 10,600 service members have been placed in full-time teaching positions since it began in 1994.

Troops to Teachers, which is man-

aged by the Defense Activity for Non-Traditional Education Support System (DANTES), was established to help relieve teacher shortages by helping eligible service members to become public school teachers.

The program offers stipends of up to \$5,000 to help pay for certification costs, or bonuses of up to \$10,000 to teach in schools serving a high percentage of low-income students, according to program officials.

Detailed information regarding program eligibility requirements, enrollment and contact information for state coordinators is available on the Troops to Teachers Web site: www.proudtoserveagain.com.

IN UNIFORM

Black Elk wasn't your typical Army enlistee. In 1996 the former junior college track star was working as a teacher's aide but felt stuck in a career rut: "I felt I needed a challenge. I wanted to test myself physically and mentally, so I enlisted at the age of 32."

After basic training and infantry school at Fort Benning, Ga., Black Elk served in Panama and Washington. He later left active duty for the Army National Guard, serving in Iraq from 2004 to 2005.

"My unit fought between Mosul and Kirkuk," Black Elk said. "Things got crazy sometimes. I try not to think too much about the combat I saw."

“
I couldn't ask for a better job than teaching my students. I know I want to continue working with kids on the reservation and maybe get into teaching special education.
”

THE TRANSITION

When he returned to South Dakota from Iraq, Black Elk earned a bachelor's in Lakota Studies from Oglala Lakota College and decided to earn his teacher's certification. As if fate smiled on his decision, a representative from Troops to Teachers visited his National Guard unit in Montana and left behind some literature. After

looking through a brochure, Black Elk enrolled in the program.

"I couldn't ask for a better job than teaching my students," he said. "I know I want to continue working with kids on the reservation and maybe get into teaching special education." ■