American Indian Graduate Center

Impacts Tribal Sovereignty

American Indian Graduate Center Scholar Uses Culture and Heritage to Transform Native Healthcare

Shayna Begay: Rocket Scientist

Law School Hopeful Seeks to Give Voices to Those That Go Unheard

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A Nation of Scholars

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It is a pleasure and an honor to be writing you just a few short weeks away from American Indian Graduate Center’s 50th Anniversary Gala: A Nation of Scholars on March 25, 2020, from 6 to 9 PM at the Coasterra Event Center and Harbor Float in San Diego.

This momentous occasion honoring our 50-year legacy will bring together hundreds of American Indian Graduate Center alumni and leaders throughout Indian Country. Featuring performances from our talented community of scholars and alumni, this celebration helps provide scholarships and academic support to students pursuing their undergraduate, graduate and professional degrees across this Nation. We will also be inducting three prestigious alumni to our inaugural American Indian Graduate Center Hall of Fame!

Featured in this issue of American Indian Graduate Magazine is a timeline of our incredible impact on American Indian and Alaska Native students pursuing education since the inception of our organization in 1969. What started as a movement toward self-governance has grown into American Indian Graduate Center becoming The Center for Native Scholarships.

As Executive Director, I could not be more proud of American Indian Graduate Center and the many wonderful accomplishments of our scholars and alumni over the years – from Larry Echo Hawk (Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma) being elected the first Native State Attorney General in U.S. history to Shayna Begay (Navajo Nation) serving on the quality assurance and systems engineering team for all U.S. nuclear weapons. Our scholars have the opportunity to attain higher education, better their lives and give back to their Tribal communities. They are the inspiration and motivation for the work that we do and watching them flourish in their educational journey and beyond is an indicator of our success as an organization.

As the largest scholarship provider to Native students in the United States, the legacy American Indian Graduate Center is most proud of its alumni. On behalf of American Indian Graduate Center’s Board of Directors, I would like to extend a warm invitation to continue celebrating that legacy with us this year. Join us in supporting Native students today, tomorrow and for the next 50 years!

Lemlmtš (Thank You),

Angelique Albert
AIGC Executive Director
Achieving great things for our community

Symbolizing a legacy of strength, identity, and heritage — what is shared today will last for generations.

Congratulations, American Indian Graduate Center, on 50 amazing years.
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Law School Hopeful Seeks to Give Voices to Those That Go Unheard

by Frieda Wiley

When Ruben Zendejas’ (Omaha Tribe of Nebraska) father first introduced him to traditional Native American dance, the young boy never fathomed the experience would plant dormant seeds, patiently awaiting their chance to grow.
His father, a Tribal court judge of half-Omaha descent, wanted his son to connect with his Indigenous heritage. At the time, the eight-year-old never considered how Native dance might shape the man he would become.

“Back then, learning Tribal dance was probably my closest tie to Native American culture,” Zendejas said.

Fast forward a decade, those seeds would begin to blossom when he enrolled at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, in 2012. He joined a dance group that focused on Native American and Latin dancing. Over the next five years, Zendejas rediscovered and deepened his connection with Omaha Tribal dance and culture; he also learned about other Native American Tribes. The dance troop also became the catalyst for two pivotal moments in his life.

The first event happened on a crisp November day when Zendejas walked into an elementary school classroom and saw children wearing headdresses made out of paper bags. His observation inspired him to find a way to teach Native urban youth about their culture through art, song and dance. He joined forces with his sister and planned to put on a pow-wow for Native children. The duo applied for a grant from Running Strong for Ameri-
can Youth to fund the program and were awarded the grant in May of 2016. In partnership with the Provo City School District, the Zendejas siblings put on a one-time event in Provo, Utah, in April of the following year. The week-long event took place at the end of the 2016-2017 school year and included workshops on traditional dances such as hoop dance and grass dance. The event also offered classes on storytelling, drumming and moccasin-making.

Zendejas’ second turning point occurred when the dance group went on tour, bringing his journey into full bloom. Zendejas and his teammates traveled the globe, sharing their dancing with people in Europe, the South Pacific and Central America. Introducing his culture to new audiences gave him a sense of pride—much like what his father must have felt when he showed him a traditional dance several years beforehand.

But a 2018 trip to Brazil would prove transformative. The group had a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to meet Indigenous Tribes living in the northern part of the country near the Amazonian border. While watching the Natives engage in a social dance, he made a startling revelation that helped him draw a vital link between all peoples—both those with and without Indigenous roots. The social dance looked oddly familiar. He noticed some of the movements bore striking similarities to Native movements back home, and he felt an immediate connection.

“Even though there are very big cultural differences, meeting people from all over the world helped me to make connections that tied everyone together,”
he said. “It helped me to see the humanity, and that some aspects of the culture are very united because of it.”

While his involvement in Native American dancing gave him a stronger sense of identity, he valued the merit of international experiences as well as a sense of community and service to others. The devout Latter-Day Saint took two years off from college to do missionary work in Brazil. As a Portuguese major with a minor in nonprofit management, the opportunity allowed him to help others while perfecting his language skills. Through it all, Zendejas remains grateful, attributing his global experiences and adventures to the support he received from American Indian Graduate Center.

“I had an unconventional college experience, and American Indian Graduate Center has really helped me financially,” he said. “I haven’t had to work to be able to participate in the dance group or travel the world to share my culture with others.”

He also credits the organization with helping him realize his dreams of starting a family. Zendejas married his wife, an Albuquerquee, NM native of Pueblo of Ysleta Del Sur descent in 2016. They welcomed their first child—a son—in May 2019.

After graduating in December 2019, the Omaha native said he has his sights set on law school—the predominant profession in his family. With an unyielding desire to give back, he plans to study Indigenous law and to continue working within the Native American community. Two of his sisters are associate judges in the Winnebago Tribe, and another one of his sisters recently passed her bar exam.

Zendejas’ father began his career as a Tribal court judge. He switched to academia shortly thereafter, teaching Native American studies at various universities before concentrating the majority of his time at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. The scholar has since returned to the bench, splitting his time between serving as a Tribal court judge and teaching emergency Tribal management at the University of Nebraska.

Although profoundly inspired by his father’s journey, Zendejas strives to blaze his own path in the legal field by giving a voice to those whose cries have fallen upon deaf ears. Inspired by issues affecting the Native American community such as the Dakota pipeline and lack of visibility to Native youth of Eastern Utah, he hopes to work for an organization that champions Native American issues and rights such as Native American Rights Fund.

“My main priority is affecting nationwide change by addressing problems within Indian country,” he said. “Issues with the Dakota access pipeline arose because of the tribe’s sovereignty not being recognized and their voices not being heard.”

Just as he used dance as a way to communicate and connect with others, Zendejas will probably do the same in a court of law, planting seeds of change along the way.

“My love for my family and my heritage are what guide me in my life,” he said. “The decisions I make and how I support my family and Indian culture are what drive me.”
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Learning how Coyote created the galaxies from one of her uncles as a child inspired Shayna Begay (Navajo Nation/Jewish) to study the universe.
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COMMODORE
These teachings about the Diné (Navajo) universe ignited Begay’s curiosity, who after a hot summer day of herding sheep with her two sisters, would look up into the starry nights for constellations like the Three Sisters – or Orion’s Belt.

“My uncle told me about the Coyote Story – how the constellations were formed,” Begay said. From Diné creation, Begay learned about the intellectual designers – the Holy People, or Diyin Diné’e. “As the Holy people were arguing, Coyote got frustrated and threw the stars in the sky. That’s how Coyote created the Milky Way.”

Begay calls Northern Navajo Agency in Dinétah home – where she learned about science and traditional cultural knowledge. Her grandmother, whether she knew it or not, taught math concepts through rug-weaving. Helping her family’s business with the creation of jewelry and art to sell to tourists at Four Corners Monument also taught her about being a team player.

All of these experiences inspired Begay’s STEM interest as a young girl, and inspired her to be the rocket scientist she is today. Or as she says in her own words, a “rocket surgeon” for the National Nuclear Security Administration’s Sandia National Laboratories in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

“Where I come from, my family would not have been able to afford to put me through college. I worked hard in school, so that I could earn scholarships and help offset the cost of attending college,” Begay said, noting that she’s grateful to American Indian Graduate Center to feature her as part of its 50th anniversary.

“I’m happy to do what I can to support American Indian Graduate Center, so they can continue to help the next generation of Native students.”
- Shayna Begay

Along with Diné cultural histories, it was also her parents who continuously fed her curiosity. For instance, Begay was exposed to intellectual conversations of blackholes at Diné College. Summer enrichment programs at Cal Tech and the University of Denver, as well as seasonal trips on and off the Navajo Nation with her family, also shaped Begay.

“When I would go back to school, I would read about what I was seeing and learning in the night time from my family,” she said. “To me that was biggest inspiration growing up – seeing all these stars.”

One trip that Begay remembers being the most impactful was her visit to the Meteor Crater near Winslow, Arizona. The massive crater, caused by a collision between earth and space over 50,000 years ago, is where Shayna saw her life journey unfold.

Among the scientists and engineers listed on the wall at the Meteor Crater gift shop, she saw many esteemed contributors to the space sciences. However, she saw no one like her – Native, Indigenous, or Diné. She told her parents that one day she would be up there.

“That’s the earliest instance of where I can think about doing what I wanted to do when I grew up,” Begay says.

Begay approached higher education with the goal of being an aerospace engineer. Eventually, she matriculated to the Florida Institute of Technology (FIT), a feeder school of NASA Scientists and Engineers. At FIT, she achieved both her Bachelor’s and Master’s degree in aerospace engineering.
Begay cites American Indian Graduate Center Scholars administered Gates Millennium scholarship as a beneficial resource to navigate the rigor of FIT and the challenge of being homesick. From comparing and contrasting the various worldviews of space science, she saw how traditional cultural knowledge provided her a unique perspective to study aerospace engineering in the university. For example, western science and Indigenous teachings have more things in common, like how the Diné Creation Story is a narrative of evolution, she says.

“People pull some stock in the western world, but looking at the Creation story of the Diné – I have immense respect when you look at it from a scientific perspective, since it is a story of evolution,” Begay adds.

After graduating from FIT, Begay arrived at Sandia National Laboratories. She is one of the engineers responsible for quality assurance and systems engineering for all U.S. nuclear weapons, as well as the development, testing and production of specialized nonnuclear components.

To better explain her technical role at Sandia National Laboratories, Begay employs the analogy of a bow and arrow weapon. She creates the shaft of the bow. The shaft, so to speak, is the most important part of any nuclear technology she helps design. “I am one of many who work on building the shaft and feathers,” Shayna explains. “I like to perfect the shaft of the bow. The arrowhead is one part, but I’m focused on the shaft,” all of which help the arrow travel to its target.

Begay’s personal and academic journey is why American Indian Graduate Center is featuring her for its 50th anniversary. “It is incredibly humbling, and I’m a huge advocate for American Indian Graduate Center. They have been really good to me in supporting me through school,” she says. “I’m happy to do what I can to support American Indian Graduate Center, so they can continue to help the next generation of native students.”
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He ultimately settled on “Chenoa,” meaning “white dove” in the Algonquinn language, relishing the peaceful nature of the gentle birds. He and Chenoa’s mother’s family, added “Bah,” a Diné (Navajo) name meaning “woman warrior,” with the idea that their daughter would one day grow into a fearless woman who fought for peace.

Years later, Chenoa Bah Stilwell-Jensen (Navajo Nation) lives up to her name. The University of New Mexico instructor is a humble, conscientious woman who champions cultural awareness and public health issues affecting the Native community—all while maintaining a strong sense of her cultural identity.

While some people reserve specific times to observe their cultural practices in private settings, Stilwell-Jensen carries her culture with her wherever she goes, seeing her cultural identity as a full extension of her life’s purpose. In fact, she introduces herself to new people in Diné, her first language—even when they neither speak nor understand her ancestral tongue. But she doesn’t do it as a form of cultural resistance or isolationism; she does so to connect and engage with others.

“Our greeting in the traditional Diné way is an introduction and protocol of who we are, where we are from and how we connect with other human beings,” she says. “Greeting people in Diné is how I begin communication and how I honor my ancestors and cultural lifeways.”

Perhaps Stilwell-Jensen’s strong sense of self stems from her bicultural upbringing, which she said helped her identify her purpose early on in her life. Born to a Navajo mother and a father of English and French-Canadian lineage, she split her childhood between rural and urban communities in Tseyahtoh, Corrales and Albuquerque, New Mexico. She affectionately calls each place home. Her close family ties not only shaped her childhood experience, but they also laid the foundation for how she would define her values and the service-oriented career path she would ultimately pursue.

Growing up, she bore witness to relatives who had various illnesses traversing the journey of health. She spent the first ten years of her life watching her grandmother tackle what she describes as “painful health challenges”—resulting from a lifelong battle with tuberculosis before ultimately succumbing to the disease. The experience profoundly affected the young child and helped shape her perspective on how people could counter adversity with resilience.

Stilwell-Jensen also saw her mother valiantly battle and overcome breast cancer. The experience gave her firsthand...
exposure to integrative medicine, as her mother routinely incorporated traditional ceremonial practices before engaging in modern medical treatment.

“Through family support, we were able to communicate ways to help her find her strength through a traditional Diné practitioner to lay the foundation of what source of ceremonial or spiritual healing was needed,” Stilwell-Jensen says.

The family relied on the traditional cultural consultations to guide the next steps of the healing process and select the ceremony that Stilwell-Jensen’s mother needed to ease her response to conventional modern treatments. Engaging in traditional ceremonial healing approaches prepared her mother for breast cancer surgery and healing through modern medicine. These experiences awakened Stilwell-Jensen’s sense of empathy, making her keenly aware of the powerful impact honoring cultural practices can have on a person’s health.

“The influential mother and grandmother figures of my life have made me a stronger woman,” Stilwell-Jensen says. “Their experiences have empowered me to listen deeply to people and how they transcend illness through cultural and ceremonial support as well as modern medical support.”

An innovative thinker, Stillwell-Jensen has devoted her career to health education. She worked in similar environments, including prevention research at the University of New Mexico and pediatric settings and school-based health science centers. Regardless of where she is employed, she remains focused on one central goal: to provide Native people with supportive resources to enhance their physical well-being.

The New Mexico native’s initial professional endeavor was in quality management for a health plan. She then transitioned into a role as a coordinator for a substance abuse and alcohol prevention program within Albuquerque Public Schools. After a little more than three years of service, she co-founded a school, the Native American Community Academy (NACA)—a public community charter school in Albuquerque for grades 6-12. Established in 2005, Stilwell-Jensen’s daughter attended the institution and graduated in 2019. Stilwell-Jensen would spend more than half a decade there, supporting the school as a community wellness volunteer. During this time, she also worked with NM Appleseed, a nonprofit organization founded by a lawyer striving to improve the lives of the poor and underserved through systemic change.

In addition to teaching a diverse range of communication courses, including intercultural communication, health communication, conflict management and mediation, at the University of New Mexico, Stilwell-Jensen has spent the last three years working as a cultural care provider for a community clinic where she focuses on traditional wellness.

The wellness advocate is grateful for American Indian Graduate Center’s contributions to her career development by funding her Master’s Degree in Community Health Education and for her Doctoral studies in Health and Cultural Communication at the University of New Mexico. She is grateful for American Indian Graduate Center’s academic scholarships and the continual reinforcement for her learning path.

Stilwell-Jensen continues to draw inspiration from her heritage and her tireless quest to thrive in professional environments while supporting her community within the holistic dimension of wellness. Now a mother of a young college student, she wants to pass her teachings on to her daughter as well as her community.

“My driving purpose in life and driving passion is to be of service to humanity and helping people who have been marginalized,” - Chenoa Bah Stillwell Jensen

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“My driving purpose in life and driving passion is to be of service to humanity and helping people who have been marginalized,” - Chenoa Bah Stillwell Jensen
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Education Strengthens Our People
American Indian Graduate Center Impacts Tribal Sovereignty

by Lindsay Mahaney

Throughout American Indian Graduate Center’s 50-year history, the organization has made a lasting impact on Indian Country.

Having contributed to over 1,300 law degrees – including Larry Echo Hawk’s (Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma) Juris Doctorate – American Indian Graduate Center alumni serve as Tribal lawyers, elected officials, advocates and more.

“I think it’s difficult to measure what the true impact is [of American Indian Graduate Center], but it has been enormous,” Echo Hawk said. “I don’t know who could calculate what the performance measures have been other than looking at the strides that Tribes have made across the country through court decisions in their favor, as well as legislation that has made it through. I think at virtually every turn there were Native Americans lawyers involved.”

American Indian Graduate Center serves Tribes to fulfill the self-determined needs of Indian Country, such as the need for Native representation in the law field. Echo Hawk recalled being one of the few minority students pursuing a law degree at the University of Utah. According to Echo Hawk, there
AIGC Alumnus Larry Echo Hawk - Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma
wasn’t even a textbook for most of his courses because the study of Indian Law was such a new concept.

“Native Americans are heavily involved in legal matters, their treaties and their governments. But there were virtually no Indian lawyers out there,” he said. “To get a law education would help to lift Native American people, protect their lands and resources in the future and uphold their treaty rights.”

Despite being one of the few early Native law scholars, Echo Hawk used his drive and passion to positively impact Indian Country to pave the way for Native representation. In the 1980’s, he served two consecutive terms in the Idaho House of Representatives. Then in 1990, Echo Hawk was elected the first Native State Attorney General in U.S. history.

However, Echo Hawk’s impact reached even further when he was selected as the Interior Department’s 11th Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs under the Obama administration in 2009. During his eight years of service in the Department of the Interior, Echo Hawk advised and impacted large-scale change for Indian Country – including the implementation of the Tribal Law and Order Act and returning over 158,000 acres of land in trust for Tribes.

Echo Hawk cited one of the biggest accomplishments during his tenure as the formation of the Tribal Leadership Conference – an annual meeting between President Obama and leaders of the 564 federally recognized Tribes in the United States at the time.

“To have that kind of leadership at the top of the federal government was just unprecedented,” Echo Hawk said. “What we were able to accomplish was a team effort.”

While American Indian Graduate Center supports students pursuing degrees in any academic field, law consistently ranks in the top areas of study for scholars along with educa-
tion and social work. In fact, since 2014 more than 500 Native scholars have received funding to pursue a law degree from American Indian Graduate Center – many of whom now work in leadership positions like Santee Lewis (Navajo Nation), Executive Director of Navajo Nation Washington Office.

“Some of my closest colleagues have worked for the White House and in the executive branch of the U.S. Government, and are now state legislators, Tribal chairmen or presidents. I think American Indian Graduate Center has really helped inspire leadership,” she said.

Lewis was selected to represent the Navajo Nation as part of Navajo President Jonathan Nez’s Cabinet in 2019. However, she originally worked as an auditor. After receiving a Bachelor of Business Administration in Accounting, Lewis spent the next seven years working as an auditor for the Navajo Nation, Chickasaw Nation and the Department of Interior. But in the back of her mind, Lewis knew she could have a greater impact on her Tribal community – which is why she returned to school for MBA and Juris Doctorate degrees.

When she reflects on her career, Lewis said she uses her degree to look for new and different ways to serve her people – and encourages future scholars to do the same by studying a variety of law areas, like securities law or oil and gas law.

“Let’s push the boundaries – don’t pigeonhole yourself.”
- Santee Lewis

“Contributing to the fabric of Tribal sovereignty, that’s what National Indian Gaming Association does. We’re a resource for Tribes and Tribal Governments.”
- Jason Giles

“We need professionals in these very specialized fields,” she said. “Let’s push the boundaries – don’t pigeonhole yourself.”
Jason Giles (Muscogee Creek), Executive Director of the National Indian Gaming Association (NIGA), is another leader for Indian Country based in Washington D.C. As the Executive Director of NIGA, Giles describes himself as an advocate for Indian Country. The non-profit organization is made up of 184 Indian Nations representing Tribes and businesses engaged in Tribal gaming enterprises. It operates as an educational, legislative and public policy resource on Indian gaming issues and Tribal community development.

Giles said that in his role a law degree is a huge asset to advocate for Indian Country, “It is a critical resource because we work so closely with Congress and also regulatory agencies where law is created.” Prior to the advocacy of organizations like NIGA, Giles explained that Tribes were often not well informed on the legislative work happening in Washington D.C. until it was too late to make an impact. With support from NIGA, Tribes can receive accurate information sooner and be involved in the conversations pertaining to Tribal sovereignty.

“The more information we can get out to Tribes and Tribal Governments the better, because that aides them in making decisions and they can see how the federal government is treating them,” Giles explained.

“Contributing to the fabric of Tribal sovereignty, that’s what National Indian Gaming Association does. We’re a resource for Tribes and Tribal Governments.”

Similar to Giles, former Tribal attorney Margo Hill (Spokane Tribe) describes herself as a servant leader for Indian

“I went to school to fight for Tribal Sovereignty and to serve my people,”

- Margo Hill

AIGC Alumna Margo Hill - Spokane Tribe
Country. As the first and only Tribal member of the Spokane Tribe to receive a law degree, she noted that her legal background has led her to a life of service to her community.

“I went to school to fight for Tribal Sovereignty and to serve my people,” she said.

Throughout Hill’s more than ten-year tenure as a Tribal attorney she fought in many cases to promote Tribal Sovereignty. She specifically noted the Spokane Tribe’s gaming compact with the State of Washington, stating it was probably one of the most important fights for Tribal Sovereignty that she encountered.

According to the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act (IGRA), passed by the U.S. Congress in 1988, states are required to negotiate gaming compacts in good faith to allow Tribes to offer casino-style gaming if it is allowed in the state. However, the Washington State Gambling Commission was not acting in good faith, trying to dictate the casino hours of operation, square footage, betting limits and more, Hill said.

“The Spokane Tribe fought. I sat at those tables and argued for the Spokane Tribe to have Tribal sovereignty and to have a gaming compact that was fair.”

The Spokane Tribe’s efforts resulted in a Tribal-State Class III Gaming Compact that was reached with the State of Washington in February 2007. As the largest scholarship provider for American Indians and Alaska Natives in the United States, American Indian Graduate Center is a force in facilitating Native representation in the law field.

“Having funding from American Indian Graduate Center and the support of Indian Country is really powerful,” Hill said. “That’s why many of us go to law school – we’re trying to help our people. When you are backed by American Indian Graduate Center, you feel supported.”

For future Native law scholars, Echo Hawks imparts the same advice his brother, John Echo Hawk, gave him – to live a life of service.

“Your education will give you the power to change the lives of your people. There’s nothing more satisfying that a person can do than to give service to a community of people.”
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As American Indian Graduate Center begins to celebrate its 50th anniversary, it is important to look back at the history of the organization and the people’s whose foresight and vision led to the creation of American Indian Graduate Center.

One of the cofounders of what today is known as American Indian Graduate Center was Robert L. Bennett (Oneida).

Charles “Chuck” Trimble, one of the first Board Members, remembered Bennett as, “a very deep gentlemen and a gentle soul. I saw him always looking for opportunities for Indian people.” His role as a co-founder is one of the many times Bennett saw an opportunity for Indian people which ultimately created opportunities for thousands of Native students over the last 50 years.

Bennett was born on the Oneida Indian Reservation near Green Bay, Wisconsin, in 1912. He attended Haskell Institute in Kansas before he studied law at Southwestern University Law School.

Timeline

1869-1960’s
• Boarding School Era – Indian Boarding School Policy established by the Federal Government, utilizing education to “kill the Indian, save the man” in an attempt to assimilate Tribal people

1967
• The BIA reports 13 American Indian graduate students in the entire nation

1969
• Robert Bennett assists in establishing the National Indian Scholarship Program at the University of New Mexico, which would later be absorbed by AIGC
• John Rainer lays the groundwork to form American Indian Scholarship, Inc, which would later become AIGC

1970
• Robert Bennett becomes director of UNM’s American Indian Law Center
• The American Indian Graduate Scholarship Program Committee (AIGC), John Rainer presiding, holds its first meeting
• AIGC (AIS) Awards first two recipients fall of 1970, Donald McCabe & Vincent Knight.

1971
• Robert Bennett, David Warren and Joe Sando sign the articles of incorporation, and the program title is changed to American Indian Scholarships, Inc

1974
• AIGC (AIS) moves the office to John Rainer’s property in Taos Pueblo
• AIGC’s 1st Scholarship endowment is established by the Blue Spruce family in honor of Bennett

As American Indian Graduate Center begins to celebrate its 50th anniversary, it is important to look back at the history of the organization and the people’s whose foresight and vision led to the creation of American Indian Graduate Center.
School in Washington D.C., where he earned his law degree in 1941. Much of his legal work supported Native land claims. For this work he was awarded the Indian Achievement Award in 1962 and Outstanding American Indian Citizen Award in 1966. His commitment and work representing American Indians caught the attention of many including President Lyndon B. Johnson.

In 1966 Bennett was appointed by President Lyndon B. Johnson to serve as the Commissioner of Indian Affairs. This appointment was historic as Bennett was only the second Native American to serve in this role. In this capacity, he often visited area offices where he was disappointed to find none of the offices were headed by one of Dr. Beryl Blue Spruce.

1975
- AIGC (AIS) Awards 22 students (12 men and 10 women) fellowships in the amount of $21,397. The average award being $973.

1981
- The Reagan administration reduces funding for all levels of Indian higher education from $282 million to $169 million. 
- To address the decrease in funding, John Rainier implemented outreach efforts which resulted in significant new funding streams for the organization.

1982
- AIGC (AIS) assists 158 students (80 women & 78 men) by providing an average fellowship award of $3700.

1983
- John Rainer participates in a Senate Budget Committee field hearing on science and math education, in Albuquerque, and later testifies before the Senate and House Appropriations Subcommittee of Interior Affairs, urging funding for Indian higher education.
- The House of Representatives approves recommendation of $978,000 BIA Contract.
- John Rainer retires on December 31st.

1984
- AIGC (AIS) welcomes new Executive Director, Lorraine Edmo
- The first AIGC Annual Report is produced.
- AIGC (AIS) offices are relocated to Albuquerque, New Mexico.
Native Americans. The seeds of this observation had likely been sown earlier at meetings with John C. Rainer (Taos Pueblo). Rainer and Bennett met often during their time in Washington, D.C., and could not help but notice the lack of American Indian/Alaska Native professionals in all fields. They were aware that much of this was due to a lack of funding for students seeking graduate degrees. In fact, in 1967 a Report on Indian Education for the American Indian Policy Review Commission noted there were only 13 Native students enrolled in graduate studies. This was further proof of the need for more funding and opportunities to fund Native students in graduate studies.

In 1969 Bennett left the Bureau of Indian Affairs and moved to Albuquerque, New Mexico, where he became the director of the American Indian Law Center. That same year Rainer was selected to direct the New Mexico Commission of Indian Affairs. As their paths crossed again in New Mexico they set out to find a solution to the issues they had identified during their time in Washington, D.C. One of the solutions was to create a scholarship program focused on funding Native students in graduate and professional programs.

To this end, the newly established National Indian Scholarship Program was founded at the University of New Mexico in August of 1969. One of the first steps the men took was to establish a board to help set priorities and help get the word out about the new program. The first Board of Directors was made up of some of the most well-known Native scholars and professionals.

Trimble remarked it was, “a virtual Who’s Who of Indian scholars and leaders. They were all doers.” The Board included, Joe Sando (Jemez Pueblo), Dave Warren (Santa Clara Pueblo), Lucy Covington (Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation), Ada Deer (Menominee), Overton James (Chickasaw), Leah Manning (Shoshone-Paiute), Chuck Trimble (Oglala Sioux Tribe),

1985
- AIGC (AIS) starts a newsletter, The American Indian Graduate Record. This later transitioned into the American Indian Graduate magazine.

1986
- The two BIA Indian graduate programs are consolidated. Administration of the Indian Law Scholarship program is transferred from the American Indian Law Center to AIGC (AIS).

1987
- AICG awards $1.6 Million in fellowships. It was estimated that students had an additional $500,000 in unmet need.

1988
- The Board redefines AIGC (AIS) as a multi-service, rather than a sole scholarship organization and enters cooperative efforts with other National Native groups and Tribal scholarship offices.
- AIGC awards 292 students (152 women and 140 men). The numbers for the fields of study were Law (103 recipients), Health (83), Education (63), Business (32), Engineering (7), Religious Studies (2), Natural Resources (1) and Fine Arts (1).

1989
- The organization name is formally changed to “American Indian Graduate Center” to reflect its expansion in becoming a national center, including additional services and programming. The change also helped communicate AIGC’s mission of producing graduate and professional degree recipients.
- John Rainer and Robert Bennett are honored at the 20th anniversary event
Rainer and Bennett. The members voted to set up an independent office, apply for tax exempt status and named Bennett the General Director. On November 14, 1970, Rainer announced a $15,000 transfer from the Donner Foundation to provide direct scholarship assistance. This grant lead to the development of a contract with the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The following year Bennett, Warren and Sando signed the Articles of Incorporation and the name of the program was changed to American Indian Scholarship, Inc. That year one of the first scholarships awarded was to Donald A. McCabe, who was awarded $1,200 to support his studies in Business Administration. McCabe would go on to serve as President of the Southwest Indian Polytechnic Institution and would be one of the first of thousands of success stories and alumni.

The work of the Center became even more critical in 1981 when the Reagan Administration reduced funding for all levels of Native higher education from $282 million to $169 million. Around this time the program also received results of a survey they had sent to past recipients to evaluate effectiveness and provide information for future proposals. They found they were providing financial assistance to less than 1/5 of all Native students attending graduate school and half of the recipients were women. The reduction in federal funding and survey results highlighted the need to support their work. The National Indian Lutheran Board donated $10,000 as seed money to generate more funds. Exxon, Texaco, Arco and Syntex also contributed.

By 1988, American Indian Graduate Center was well established. That year 152 women and 140 men received funding. These students

1990
• AIGC receives first legacy gift. At her passing Elizabeth Furber bequests ¼ of her estate to AIGC for the Elizabeth Furber Scholarship Trust.

1991
• AIGC receives 763 applications and awards 427 fellowships (237 women and 190 men)

1995
• AIGC surveys all federally recognized tribes to identify future employment needs. The top ten professional needs are (in order): business managers, lawyers, accountants, natural resources managers, doctors, teachers, counselors, financial analysts, engineers and computer technicians. Additional survey information revealed that an estimate 89% of tribal members earned $20,000 or less, and that only 3% had a college degree.

1996
• AIGC awards 538 students, with the highest numbers being Law (161), Health (160), followed by Education (59) and Business (49)

2000
• AIGC welcomes new Executive Director, Norbert S. Hill, Jr
• AIGC is selected to administer the Gates Millennium Scholar (GMS) Program for American Indian/Alaska Natives, resulting in the doubling of AIGC staff and office space. American Indian Graduate Center Scholars (AIGCS) affiliate is formed to manage the program, expanding service to undergraduates.

“A virtual Who’s Who of Indian scholars and leaders. They were all doers.”
- Chuck Trimble
represented 81 Tribes from 22 states. The students were studying in the disciplines of law, health, religious studies, natural resources and fine art.

Another milestone was reached in 1989 as the organization celebrated its 20th anniversary. The program underwent a final name change to become American Indian Graduate Center. The name was changed to be more reflective of the organization’s expansion to become a national center with expanded services and activities. As American Indian Graduate Center entered the 1990’s they expanded their work and footprint with a $65,000 grant from the Department of Energy for a tracking project to develop a national database of all Native college students to be used as a way to identify potential graduate students for internship and employment opportunities. The database would also assist in identifying and documenting the needs of Native students. Five years later American Indian Graduate Center sent a survey to all federally recognized Tribes to identify their future employment needs. The top ten professions reported (in order of need) were: business manager, lawyer, accountant, natural resource manager, doctor, teacher, counselor, financial analyst, engineer and computer technician. The survey also found less than 3% of Tribal members had a college degree. American Indian Graduate Center used this data to inform their work and as reminders of the importance of their mission.

The Center continued to grow and reached another major milestone in 2001. American Indian Graduate Center was selected as one of the four partner organizations to help administer the Gates Millennium Scholarship Program. This selection required American endowments in its history, ensuring the sustainability of the many scholarship programs.

2001
• John Rainer passes on September 22.
• The Council of 100 inaugural meeting is held in September. The council is composed of distinguished leaders, scholars and traditional individuals, who will serve as ambassadors for AIGC to foster Native student leadership, growth and development.
• AIGC begins publishing “The American Indian Graduate” magazine.

2002
• Robert Bennett passes on July 11.

2003
• The first John Rainer Memorial Fellowships is awarded.

2004
• AIGC receives the largest amount of

2005
• AIGC partners Accenture, LLP to administer its first corporate scholarship program.
• All Native American High School Academic Team program is established to provide support to high school seniors with high academic performance.

2006
• The National Scholarship Providers Association names the American Indian Graduate Center as the 2005-2006 Scholarship Provider of the Year.

2007
• AIGC welcomes new Executive Director Sam Deloria.
2011
- AIGC receives the YAWA award for education, from the San Manuel Band of Mission Indians.

2012
- AIGC launches online scholarship application services

2015
- AIGC administers Year 1 of the Cobell Education Scholarship Fund

2016
- The Gates Millennium Scholars Program reaches goal of 20,000 scholars and the class of 2016 was the final cohort. Through AIGCS, the program empowered 2,715 outstanding Native students and supported them throughout their educational journey.

2017
- AIGC welcomes new Executive Director Angelique Albert.
- AIGC college prep program Know Before “U” Go receives NAFOA’s Education Program of the Year award
- AIGC launches the Making the Grad Student of the Month Program
- AIGC received the Chairman’s Leadership Award from the National Indian Gaming Association
- AIGC implements new strategic direction of holistic student support programming based on 20 years of data and informed best practices from the GMS program supporting the expansion of our partnerships with Tribes, corporations, foundations and individuals.
“A lot of times things like this turned into a one-time offering. Instead they built an organization with the capacity to grow and acquire more funding to provide more opportunities. I really think Bennett had a lot to do with that.”
- Chuck Trimble

Indian Graduate Center to create American Indian Graduate Center Scholars, Inc to manage the scholarship. This addition doubled the staff and office space required to administer the Gates Millennium Scholarship. The scholarship was funded by a generous grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The goal of the Gates Millennium Scholarship Program was to fund 20,000 outstanding, low-income American Indian/Alaska Native, African American, Asian Pacific Islander American and Hispanic students with the opportunity to complete their undergraduate studies in the degree of their choice. The early 2000s were marked with huge growth, but American Indian Graduate Center also saw huge losses. Rainer passed away September 22, 2001. The next year Bennett passed away. They were able to witness over 30 years of growth from the scholarship program they started in 1969. American Indian Graduate Center continues to

2018
• Inducted inaugural AIGC Students of the Year, Rebecca St. Germaine (Graduate) and Brook Thompson (Undergraduate) were honored at the National Indian Gaming Association Tradeshow and Convention
• With the sunsetting of GMS, AIGC builds two new departments that result in the increased student programs and diversified revenue

2019
• AIGC launches new brand reflecting our vision: successfully empowering our students alongside their support systems
• AIGC awarded 1340 students. The average award amount was $10,408 and the average unmet need for students was $22,552.
• AIGC collaborates with 8th Generation and three alumnae artists to create the 50th Anniversary Commemorative Blanket. Janelle Cronin, Maka Monture and Brittany Gene were the alumni artists selected from a national competition to design the blanket.
build and add partners to their work. Through the support of endowed gifts, federal resources, corporate support, foundations, alumni and individual private donations American Indian Graduate Center continues to grow. Last fiscal year American Indian Graduate Center awarded nearly $15 million in scholarships and academic support services to 1,340 Native scholars. These scholars represent 202 tribes from 49 states. The impact of American Indian Graduate Center can be seen throughout Indian Country. As Chuck Trimble looked back on the history of the Center he remarked on the vision of Bennett, “A lot of times things like this turned into a one-time offering. Instead they built an organization with the capacity to grow and acquire more funding to provide more opportunities. I really think Bennett had a lot to do with that.” It’s hard not to hear the smile in Trimble’s voice as he recalls the beginnings of American Indian Graduate Center. What started as the idea of two men has grown to become the premier national resource in funding and continues to empower the next generation of Native leaders across all sectors. It is hard to find a Native professional that does not have a connection to the Center as an alumni or friend of the Center. Those that receive support from American Indian Graduate Center often have similar feedback and recognize the Center is not just a scholarship granting organization, it is family. The dream of Bennet and Rainer is being realized by so many.

Bennet would be happy to know that if he were to walk into a BIA field office today, he would be met by another Native person running the office, surrounded by Native staff. His dream of creating Native professionals extends past regional bureau offices to doctor’s office, classrooms, courts, laboratories, agencies, Tribal offices and beyond.

2020
- American Indian Graduate Center celebrates its 50th Anniversary by hosting a Gala in conjunction with the National Indian Gaming Association Tradeshow and Convention in San Diego, CA
- American Indian Graduate Center celebrates a collective impact of $200,000,000 in scholarship and student support services offered to over 16,000 American Indian/Alaska Native students since inception. AIGC administers over 20 scholarship opportunities, in addition to offering support services that are designed specifically to address the needs of Native students in post-secondary education.

AIGC actively partners with Tribes, corporations, foundations, government agencies, nonprofits, and academic institutions to provide scholarship needs for students. Throughout our 50-year history we have empowered students from over 500 Tribes in all 50 states by providing scholarship dollars and support services for undergraduate, graduate and professional degrees.
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Jay Calhoun
Cherokee Nation; Toigo Alumnus, Tuck 2008

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Sherry, a member of the Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma, made a commitment to herself to begin and maintain an exercise program. You may see her walking with her husband at their local park. Sherry makes physical activity a priority for her health, and encourages you to do the same.

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When you talk with Dr. Sandy Littletree (Navajo Nation) about her background, she admits that she didn’t have a clue when mapping out her education.
“I knew that I wanted to get a Ph.D because I just knew that was the highest educational level you could go,” said the lecturer at the University of Washington Information School, who graduated from U of W in 2018 with a Doctorate in Information Science.

“But I didn’t have a plan. I didn’t even know why I wanted a Ph.D, and I didn’t know what that even meant,” Littletree said. “I also had no role models and I had zero clue. I figured it out along the way.”

Littletree went a long way in figuring it out. Littletree, who grew up in Northwest New Mexico in Kirkland, started off as a communication disorders major at New Mexico State University studying speech language pathology after having a lisp when growing up. After reaching her junior and senior years, she realized that the career involved a Master’s degree, which included the study of medicine, the brain, anatomy and physiology, subjects she really wasn’t interested in. Still, she kept with the program.

After graduating from NMSU, her interests then turned to teaching when she did a year of Amer-
iCorps back in Farmington, New Mexico, and worked in adult literacy and adult education.

“I really fell in love with literacy and education, and helping people read and getting ready for the GED. Then I thought, ‘Oh, OK, I want to be a teacher or help with education.’ And then I went back to NMSU to focus on literacy or reading specialist,” Littletree said, who received a Master’s in New Zealand, that were doing ground-breaking work in Indigenous libraries and prospectives. Indigenous libraries in these countries were re-looking at classifications and labels from their own culture and worldview. For example, a shield in these libraries may get cataloged or classified as something other than a weapon or utilitarian object such as an item used for healing. The Maori in New Zealand were creating their own thesaurus for their language to help find items faster within the larger, established academic system.

“I didn’t have a lot of experiences in a library growing up – I liked them but I thought that libraries were just about books until I realized that there was so much more to this,” Littletree said of the program that would plant the seed for her Ph.D and studies into Indigenous libraries.

After earning a Master of Science in Information Studies at UT-Austin, Littletree then went to work as an academic librarian at North Carolina State University Libraries in Raleigh through their Fellows Program. Though helping build new collections and instructional tools was something entirely new, she knew something was missing.

“I had awesome mentors and I was learning a lot but I had this feeling deep down that I needed to do something, that I was giving back,” she said.

Curriculum and Instruction and went on to obtain a teacher’s license for high school and secondary school to teach language arts.

But the teaching career would be short-lived after federal mandates such as No Child Left Behind, a law that penalized schools and teachers for little improvement, deterred her as an enthusiastic, recent college graduate.

After “kind of stumbling along,” but still supporting herself and being accountable to her family, Littletree learned about and applied for a library science scholarship called Honoring Generations for Native Americans interested in Tribal librarianship from the University of Texas at Austin. Under the direction of Dr. Loriene Roy (Anishinabe), Honoring Generations provided mentorship, tuition support and a small cohort. Part of the program also included travel to other areas of the world, including Canada and New Zealand, that were doing ground-breaking work in Indigenous libraries and prospectives.

A new opportunity then presented itself to oversee the University of Arizona’s School of Information’s Knowledge River, a scholarship program for Native and Latino students who want to become librarians. Knowledge River focused on leadership, program development and retention of these librarians of color. It was that moment Littletree realized how much she enjoyed helping to create the next generation of information-keepers.

“I could see myself in some of their struggles – a lot of them were first-generation college students and a lot were dependent on that funding, so I really worked at helping them stay in school, keep that funding and finish,” she said.

Seeing how much a support system aided these graduate students, Littletree sought a Ph.D program that had a similar cohort structure. At the University of Washington, not only were there other Indigenous Ph.D students but Indigenous faculty, which she says was one of the keys to success.

“As an undergrad, I didn’t have a strong cohort but I’ve always been able to figure things out and get by. But I felt as a Ph.D student at this level and academia at this level were so much different than being an undergrad. Having that support from other Indigenous Ph.D students and Indigenous faculty helped in achieving my goals and feeling more comfortable in using the research methods I wanted to use,” she said.

“It also helped in expressing...
my criticism of these information systems and helped me to understand the problems with these systems but we could work together to try and solve them … Having these other scholars and group of women showed me there were other ways to engage with literature and other ideas in finding ways in making things better for other people. “

She also said having scholarships and American Indian Graduate Center’s funding and support also helped her succeed in school.

“I’m actually debt-free,” Littletree said. “I have three Masters and a Ph.D and it’s all debt-free because of programs like American Indian Graduate Center and my Tribe. I was able to figure out opportunities, all helping me focus on school and my family did not have to worry about it.”

While she jokingly says she’s still trying to figure out what she wants to be when she grows up, she admits trying to figure out what she wanted to do in life was always a challenge. But she wasn’t afraid to investigate her interests, advice she gives to others who also don’t have that educational road map.

“It’s OK to explore and go down to different roads and if it doesn’t feel right, it’s ok to switch gears,” she said. “Finding the right path is challenging for a lot of us. Keep exploring. Don’t give up.”

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AIGC Scholar Kelly Rae Cleveland, Navajo Nation, Lake Superior Band of Bad River Chippewa, Ute and Hopi
The vast amount of tribulations and errors one is held accountable for can often cloud the desire to evolve past such moments. I, myself, am no stranger to the pressure of external and internal factors competing with my passion to express my thoughts, actions and need to tell stories.

From a young age, I often found myself at the mercy of stories, mostly fiction, shared and forced upon me, to: learn from, agree with and drink as gospel. The environment I lived in was not stable nor rich in the nutrients needed to grow as a young disenfranchised individual. Yet, I had to continue forward through the onslaught of terror and heartbreak. As I aged and saw the only constant in my life was chaos, I decided to take a chance on someone who I often ignored: myself.

The first time I invested in myself was by attending school at a local state university - a place extremely shy of the grandeur many of mentors thought I earned a right to pursue. Despite the disappointment they felt for my future, an intangible force wholly unrecognizable to me, I flourished in the excitement of scholarly rigor, tradition and strive for excellence. I was always able to blend into the walls of any room, an aesthetically pleasing decor of passive agreement and doubt. It was a professor of mine who asked for me to “allow others to pick my mind” as the words I shared on paper did not match the vessel who entered his classroom.

Was I worthy of the invitation? Naturally, I thought, “no.” From those days of awkward stumbling’s, I have become a force to reckon with in many rooms, classrooms and spaces. I have a voice that no longer shakes with anxiety and fear of failing - instead, my voice carries strong reverberations of noises calling others to action, empowering the communities I love and the families who define them.

As an individual who has gone through a festering storm of betrayal, loss and grief - my constant has been pursuing my education, coupled with a desire to grow and love with a quickening heart of agency. I often think of my four-year-old son, a large spirit confined in a small body. How does he breathe in a world where pollutants are unseen? How does he see not knowing what perfect vision is? How does he taste when he does not know the words appetite and craving? How does he hear without having heard all the tones and melodies of a world older than him? He exists, and I exist with him.

As I tread forward in my educational and professional career, I remind myself I am one of many who investigate questions as simple as the ones articulated by children, much like my child, who ask with courage because the alternative: fear; does not do justice to the evolving state of one’s spirit. Being an American Indian Graduate Center Scholar means being a warrior: a large spirit unconfined by anybody.
MAKING

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and Community Engagement
I have been blessed to have a family support system that motivates and encourages me in my educational endeavors. My husband and I, along with our two children, Rylan (15) and Ashlyn (6), live in Tahlequah, Oklahoma. Both my husband and I juggle the role of being full-time employees and part-time students. In addition, our son is active in high school band and our youngest enjoys dance and ballet. Currently, I am the Tutor Coordinator at TRIO Student Support Services at Northeastern State University. My career in higher education started over 12 years ago and through the years, I have worked at a few different higher education institutions including a junior college, a four year regional university, a private college and a Tribal higher education office.

My undergraduate degree is in American Indian Studies and was obtained at Northeastern State University. In spring 2016, I graduated from NSU again, this time with a M.S. in Higher Education Leadership. The following fall, I began my journey as a doctoral student working towards a Ph.D. in Educational Leadership & Policy Studies. Throughout my post-secondary educational venture I have been a non-traditional student, working full-time and also holding roles as a mother and a wife. My current research interests include the persistence, retention and graduation rates of American Indian students and how these success indicators are influenced by the incorporation of culturally relevant support programming on college campuses.
Kiana Wood
Fairbanks, AK
Chinik Eskimo Community Tribe
Wells Fargo Undergraduate

I am a senior nursing student at George Fox University. I am currently in my senior practicum at Unity Center for Behavioral Health in the adolescent unit. I am passionate about what I do and hope to work as a pediatric nurse after I graduate. I am interested in the mental health field as well and strive to bring about awareness of mental health conditions. I am from the Chinik Eskimo Community Tribe of Golovin. It is a goal of mine to one day be a traveling nurse to villages of Alaska, meeting their various needs that can go undetected without frequent access to healthcare.

To me, being an AIGC Scholar means setting aside part of myself to focus on something greater – something that will benefit future generations and better the lives of others. Although it may be my education that is being funded, I see it as an investment to those I will be working with in my career.

Being an AIGC Scholar gives me a sense of hope that I can make a difference and that there are people out there who believe in me. I hope to give back to my community as a traveling nurse to the Native villages of Alaska. Being a scholar of an Alaska Native / Native American specific scholarship is part of my identity as an Alaska Native, as it gives me a hope that I can pass on to others that they too can pursue higher education and make a difference in their community.
Jessica Buckless
Polson, MT
Confederated Salish Tribe
AIGCS/Gates Millennium

After receiving the Gates Millennium Scholarship in 2008, my studies took me to Hawaii, Missouri and then Minnesota where I earned my Bachelor of Arts in Communication Studies from the University of Minnesota. Go Gophers! I then pursued a Master of Arts in Teaching from Hamline University. I began my teaching career as a preschool teacher and then as a third-grade teacher. This year, my second year of teaching third grade, I started an educational doctorate program from the University of Northern Colorado. The Gates Millennium Scholars Program has shaped my life in ways that I never knew were possible. I have had opportunities to work with students of color from all backgrounds. My background has inspired me to become an administrator to help American Indian students succeed. My third graders inspire me to be better every day and my experience growing up on the Flathead Reservation has taught me that teachers can have one of the biggest impacts on a child’s life, especially if they can connect to them culturally. I grew up watching my grandfather, Joe McDonald, change the lives of so many people on the Flathead Reservation by helping start Salish Kootenai College. I witnessed the college grow and change and the commitment my grandfather had in making a difference in the community through education. I will be the second person in my family to earn a Doctorate in Education after my grandfather.

He has inspired me to be better and to go back to our community and make a difference through education. If I can make even half of the impact that my grandfather has had on education, my life would be fulfilled.
Ty Montgomery

Coats, KS  
Chickasaw Nation  
Wells Fargo Undergraduate

Ty Montgomery of Coats, Kansas, is a freshman student at Oklahoma State University. He is dual majoring in Biochemistry and Animal Biotechnology through the college of Agriculture. At OSU, Ty is a member of the President’s Leadership Council, Collegiate Block & Bridle and the Rugby team. Ty has been active in Boy Scouts, holds the highest rank of Eagle Scout and is a member of the Order of the Arrow Honor Society.

While in high school, Ty was a varsity letterman in football, garnering many district and league awards. Being involved in 4-H for eleven years and holding leadership positions in the Kansas Junior Red Angus Association has allowed him to develop many professional relationships in the beef and agriculture industry. Ty plans to complete his undergraduate work at OSU and pursue a graduate degree at Kansas State University. Ty is the son of Kenneth & Lori Montgomery of Coats.
Jordan Oglesby

Shiprock, NM  
Navajo Nation  
Special Higher Education Program

Jordan Oglesby (Diné) is a member of the Navajo Nation from Shiprock, New Mexico. She received her B.B.A. with a concentration in Finance from the University of New Mexico in 2017 and is currently a third-year law student at the University of New Mexico School of Law. After attending PLSI through the American Indian Law Center, Inc. in 2017, she subsequently served as a PLSI Teaching Assistant in 2018. Jordan is Co-Editor-in-Chief of the Tribal Law Journal and the National NALSA Public Relations Director. She is pursuing an Indian Law Certificate and plans to use her law degree to focus on missing and murdered Indigenous women as well as supporting sustainable economic development in Indian Country.
Katelynn Morgan  
Talala, OK  
Cherokee Nation  
Science Post Graduate Scholarship Fund

I went to high school at Oologah-Talala Public Schools. I graduated ranked first in my class and received the Valedictorian award. I am a second-year civil engineering student. I am currently a resident assistant at the University of Arkansas campus. I am a Lead Hog adviser and mentor, the University of Arkansas Chapter of the American Indian Science and Engineering Society treasurer, the American Indian Science and Engineering Society Regional Representative and National Residence Hall Honorary Director of Administration and Finance. I will be studying abroad this summer in Italy and hopefully studying abroad next spring in Australia. This past summer I participated in a research experience for undergraduates at the University of Arkansas. There, I experimented to find an extraction method to removed dicamba herbicide from soybean biomasses. After graduation, I am hoping to move to Houston to be closer to my sister and begin my career. For my career, I want to focus my degree towards the environmental side of civil engineering.
Kelly Cleveland

Bloomfield, NM
Navajo Nation
Special Higher Education Program, AIGC Graduate Named Scholarship

Kelly Cleveland is an alumna of the University of New Mexico, Eastern New Mexico University and San Juan College. Her specialty is in Education with a Bachelor’s Degree in Elementary Education with an endorsement in English Language Arts. She has completed a Master’s certificate program in TESOL as well as a certification for having completed an Alternative Licensure Program in Secondary Education. Her teaching experience is based on teaching English with high school students in Bloomfield, New Mexico, within both a regular and alternative high school setting. She has worked under the BIE’s FACE program as an Adult Education and Preschool teacher and is a firm believer in the strength of community to empower children, youth and adults as leaders for the current and next generation.

Ms. Cleveland is a graduate student at the Institute of American Indian Arts, working towards her MFA in Creative Writing with a poetry focus. All things considered, aside from being a young working professional – Ms. Cleveland is proud to have been raised in a multi-linguistic family with heritage and cultural background composed of the following tribes: Navajo, Lake Superior Band of Bad River Chippewa, Ute and Hopi. Currently, she works as a Prevention Specialist at the Native American Community Academy and enjoys writing comedy skits and routines in her free time.
My name is Brittni Bisceglia. I am presently a freshman at Fort Lewis College (FLC) in Durango, Colorado, where I am majoring in Public Health and minoring in Psychology. I thrive on being active and I try to engage in as many activities as possible. For example, I am on the FLC cheer team where I presently cheer for football and volleyball (and soon I will also cheer for basketball). I also enjoy traveling during various weekends with the FLC club tennis team to surrounding tennis tournaments. Additionally, I have recently been named the Chief of Association on the Animas Association Advisors (i.e. the counsel for my dorm at Animas Hall) where I am responsible for leading Animas Association meetings and actively recruiting new members. I love volunteering at Wolfwood Refuge in Ignacio, Colorado, where I feel I can make a difference in making our world a better, more humane place.
Jermayne Tuckta

Warm Springs, OR  
Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs Reservation  
Special Higher Educations Program

I was raised on the Warm Springs Reservation of Central Oregon and born in the neighboring town of Madras, Oregon. When I was growing up, I thought I was lucky, because I had the chance to hear my maternal grandmother speak our heritage language with her sisters, and also had the chance to experience our culture and spirituality through my paternal grandmothers side of the family. This has motivated me to work with other fluent speakers of my dialect in my community, and to advance my fluency in the language.

Now that both my grandmothers are gone, I only hear my heritage language during ceremonies. I wish to change that and hear my heritage language being spoken amongst my community again and to fully understand my own culture. My efforts, so far, include some community classes that I have offered in Language classes and tule mat classes. One day, I hope to offer so much more to my community and bridge the knowledge of my elders to future speakers so that our language and culture does not become dormant.
Aiyana Pitts
Gardnerville, NV
Washoe Tribe of Nevada and California
Wells Fargo Undergraduate

My name is Aiyana Pitts and I am 18 years old. I am currently a freshman at the University of Nevada, Reno. I am happy to say that I was born and raised here in Nevada and am an enrolled member of the Washoe Tribe of Nevada and California. Growing up on the Dresslerville Reservation, I am the oldest of four children. This makes me the first child that my parents are sending to college. Ever since I was little, I have been blessed with the ability to do well in school, and because of this, I was always recognized by my tribe for my educational success. By attending and succeeding in college, I hope to defy the odds and silence the stereotypes that can often be placed upon youth growing up on a reservation.

Coming from a community where family is highly valued, I tend to spend my free time with my family or taking care of my younger siblings. I finished my first semester with a 3.74 GPA and though I am proud of myself, I am working for a 4.0 from here on out because I know that it is possible. In order to meet my career goal, I plan to keep attending the University of Nevada, Reno, and graduate from the College of Liberal Arts with my Bachelor’s Degree in Criminal Justice. From there, I hope to get accepted into Stanford Law School and graduate with my Juris Doctorate.
My name is Natacha Messerly Doney, and I am an enrolled member of the Blackfeet Tribe. I have been married for six years, and together, my husband and I have adopted several fur babies: Morby, Lily and an unnamed kitten I found on Highway 2. Fort Belknap is the place I call home, but I currently teach grades 7-12 English Language Arts in Dodson, Montana. From an early age, I knew I wanted to help the local youth in any way I could. I saw some of the problems my friends were going through and decided that earning a teaching degree would help me achieve this goal. I graduated with my Bachelor’s Degree in Secondary Education and English in December 2016, and this fall I will begin the journey of obtaining my Master’s Degree in Education. Fitness is an important part of my life. One of my favorite hobbies is running in the Little Rockies. Every summer I look forward to competing in local fitness challenges for fun. In the winter I enjoy attending CrossFit classes. In addition to running, I also love Panda Express orange chicken, trying new coffees, reading American and British literature, hanging out with friends and family and spending too much money at Target.
Taylor Sokolowski

Lexington, VA
Monacan
Wells Fargo Undergraduate

Taylor is part of the Monacan Indian Nation of Virginia and is pursuing a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration, Finance at Elon University. In addition to her Finance Major, she has Minors in both Accounting and Sport Management. She is a Dean’s List Scholar and currently maintains a 3.6 GPA. Taylor is a member of Sigma Kappa, Kappa Zeta at Elon. She participates in the Sigma Kappa Walk to End Alzheimer’s, where she was a Top Ten Fundraiser for 2017. In addition to Sigma Kappa, Taylor is the Family Room Assistant Director for Elonthon. Elonthon is a 24-hour dance marathon that raises funds and awareness for Duke Children’s Hospital. Elonthon has raised over 2 million dollars since its inception in 2003. In her free time, Taylor volunteers as a lacrosse coach for Triad Youth Lacrosse League. Taylor spends her summers working as an office assistant at Full Circle Catering and volunteering as a classroom assistant for the College Orientation Workshop held at Virginia Military Institute. Taylor’s long-term goal is to complete her Master’s degree in Sport Management and pursue a career in Sports Finance.
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