

The power of a Navajo education

Written by By Boderra Joe Sun Correspondent
Tuesday, 28 November 2017 16:33



There is true beauty in education, and diverse opportunities that can come from pursuing it – especially if you are Native.

I say that with such aspiration because I recently spoke to three Diné women, all of whom went on to share their education and knowledge with Navajo people and other ethnicities.

These women inspired and influenced me. They assured me that Navajo knowledge, education and self-identity come from what we discover throughout years of furthering our studies.

As a 25-year-old Diné grad student studying poetry and working as a freelance writer and photographer, I believe I am fulfilling my destiny with Navajo education.

When I say Navajo education, what I mean is how to be buoyant, and how to take that voice and later apply it toward a career.

However, before I continue, know that I am still progressing in this culture and widening my studies as a poet and writer.

Being born Diné and raised in a rich culture, I was taught at an early age who I am, where I come from and what my purpose in life is. This was taught to me through education, ceremonies, art, community and so forth.

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My mom and grandparents still teach me and guide me in different directions so that one day I will become someone better than myself. Someone important.

But where would I be today without the discipline, the teachings and the support that I received from my mom and grandparents?

I ask those questions to reassure myself. And I'm sure you do too. I am reassured that even though I am pursuing my master's degree in creative writing, it does not mean I am better than anyone, nor that I know everything.

What really matters to me is how can I be a voice for and to Navajo people.

Which brings me to one of my grandmothers, Esther Yazzie-Lewis.

I went through a kinaaldá (a womanhood ceremony) and my grandmother was the one who tied my hair. I knew of her level of education, her determination to give back to her people and to keep the Navajo culture alive and thriving.

SHÍMÁSÁNI, MY GRANDMA

She has been and still is someone that I admire to this day. She gives Navajo people the ability to live and survive in Western society.

How?

Yazzie-Lewis was born and raised on a farm and sheep ranch in Farmington. She attended

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Navajo Methodist Mission School, now known as Navajo Preparatory School, located in Farmington.

After an incident in her senior year at Navajo Mission School, she waited for 10 years to attend college at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, where she received her Bachelor of Science degree in political science with a minor in English, as well as two master's degrees in public administration and in American studies in language and culture.

She didn't have support from her family, as her mother passed when she was 16 and her father was too strict, forcing her to learn to do things on her own. Still, she was still able to continue on, and survive.

CAREER PATHS

She lives in Edgewood, and currently teaches conversational Navajo language at UNM Continuing Education in Albuquerque. She also trains the Navajo Judicial staff on translating Navajo work at Navajo Technical University in Crownpoint.

Between those 10 years, she started out working with the Navajo Nation police in Arizona, as the first Navajo woman police officer and radio dispatcher. She then worked for the Judicial Branch of the Navajo Nation as a deputy court clerk for the tribal courts and with the tribal probation office.

In the judicial branch, she was trained for court administrative work in criminal proceedings at The National Judicial College in Reno.

She mentioned that during her time at tribal courts she was introduced to federal courts by a U.S. Probation Officer, who told her that federal courts were in need of an interpreter in Albuquerque.

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After that, her career flourished and took her around the world.

TRAVELING ACROSS STATES & OVERSEAS

Her life branched out in different states as a Navajo interpreter under federal courts in New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, Colorado and Washington.

Today, she is not only an interpreter, but also an active member at the Southwest Research and Information Center in Albuquerque. Her work there deals with uranium and gas exploitation and contamination, and has taken her to diverse countries overseas, including Austria, Germany, Africa and Japan.

EXPOSURE

Through her work with the non-profit Environmental Justice in Uranium Mining, Yazzie-Lewis translated testimonies for Navajo people who worked in the uranium mines. Alongside her was Dr. Doug Brugge of the Tufts University School of Medicine in Boston. Together, they edited the book "The Navajo People and Uranium Mining."

She also gained exposure after traveling to Switzerland to help the Navajo people who resisted the Navajo-Hopi land dispute. She interpreted in the International Court of Justice, also known as the "world courts."

Constantly traveling and teaching, she now volunteers her time as a guest speaker during conferences, committees and school events, where she talks about the Navajo culture and the Navajo way of life.

SHOVELING THROUGH

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When I asked my grandmother for her perspective on education, she said, "You have to unravel everything that you've learned and reconstruct it to how it helps people."

In other words, you must learn to adapt your education toward your career and your community.

"As a Navajo person, you should get up with a new page in life," she said. "Every day the sun comes up, which means new experiences. New understanding of things."

Nowadays, when it comes to applying our knowledge to jobs, businesses want to hire people with an associate or higher degree plus years of experience. But sometimes having a higher degree with no experiences can put you at the bottom of the list.

That shouldn't be the case. It is all about how you use your education.

"You have to keep yourself in the real world," my grandmother said. "Understanding the real life that is out there because a lot of times, individuals will advance themselves and still be ignorant."

She added that if you don't know how to apply what you've learned to people, you're not beneficial to the people.

Being educated is one thing, but being young is another.

As a Diné person pursuing my education, I am already breaking barriers that try to eliminate my existence as another Native with knowledge and identity.

"It's like having a brand new shovel. The only way you can understand your shovel is if the handle is worn by your hands," my grandmother said. "That the blade of the shovel is worn by

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the way you push down into the dirt.”

She continued, “You can do many things with a shovel. If you don’t ever use that shovel, it never gets worn to your character, to your way of life.”

WITHSTANDING & UPHOLDING

Through the course of her education and career, my grandmother faced discrimination and ignorance, and even failed classes.

“I was able to live through those times without giving up,” she said. “Without saying it’s too hard. And going through that made me stronger in able and capable to deal with Western society.”

Of course, she is not alone in her struggles, as some of us are resisting every single day.

“Learn to be tough. Live with it and be able to withstand it,” my grandmother said. “Be strong and not infuriated.”

My journey toward serving the Navajo people has come through being a writer. Whether it’s poetry or reporting, not many can write, so I feel that I am creating and building a voice for myself and for Navajo people.

The beauty of writing is that my words will be remembered. To be a Diné writer as my grandma is an interpreter is rare and important, because we are a voice for the people.

I am where I am because of the seeds that my grandmother planted. My huge gratitude goes to my mother and grandparents, for they truly inspire me.

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OTHER EXPERIENCES

Yazzie-Lewis was the lead faculty and trainer for the Navajo Interpreter Training Institute at UofA.

She has retired, but went back to freelancing as an interpreter with different federal state, local and Navajo courts.

She assists attorneys who are preparing their clients to go to court, as well as interpreting medical terms for Navajo people in the hospital, courts and prisons.

She has done a ton of transcribing from English to Navajo for the Navajo Nation Department of Justice, the Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Department of Education.

She transcribed the Navajo Nation Employee Benefits into Navajo and the Navajo Nation Wells Fargo 401(k) plan.

She worked with the EPA out of San Francisco, and worked with people in Cameron, Ariz. to clean up uranium waste.

EDUCATIONAL TIMELINE

1979-1990: She moved to Albuquerque and was a freelance Navajo interpreter for federal courts.

1990: She was recruited and certified for a full-time position at federal courts.

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1991-1992: The state of N.M. approached her to certify state interpreters through the University of Arizona, in Tucson, Ariz. where over 115 Navajos were being certified.

1996: She interpreted big cases including Cobell v. Salazar along with more than 20 other cases.

1990-2013: She devoted her career to Navajo interpretation, and then retired.

2014-2016: She was the Navajo Language instructor at UNM, where she also taught Basic Navajo Language and Basic Medical Navajo Language.

2017: She interpreted for the Navajo Generating Station in the Yazzie v. U.S. EPA case in Page, Ariz. in the spring.

By Boderra Joe

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