

Academic success at Diné College

Written by By Bernie Dotson Sun Correspondent
Thursday, 18 May 2017 23:57



Black Rock's Travis Teller is proud DC grad

The reality for a lot of Native American males is that they've already been left behind academically. To complicate matters, there is no public policy or system reform designed to help them catch up.

By the time they reach high school, 42 percent have failed a grade at least once due to a myriad of circumstances.

But there are a lot of Native American males who finish school, like Travis Teller of Black Rock, Ariz., on the Navajo Nation Indian Reservation, who was part of the 2017 graduating class at Diné College. Teller, 37, graduated May 12 from Diné College with an associate of arts degree in Diné Studies.

"It took a lot of effort for me to get through what I started," Teller said. "It took the understanding and help from my wife and family. And it took guidance and direction from God."

A graduate of Chinle High School, where he played football, basketball and baseball, Teller is the father of two kids, Kayeona, 18, a math major at Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colo., and

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Ian, 16, a student at Navajo Prep in Farmington. He is a traditional practitioner, or medicine man, and took some years off from Diné College to further the craft. When family responsibilities set in, he put Diné College aside, but vowed to return.

In Native culture, a medicine man is a traditional healer and spiritual leader who serves a given community. Teller first enrolled at Diné College in 2001 and worked at the college as a Diné counselor where he assisted in the development of traditional counseling curriculum.

“I was a young parent,” Teller said about his stop and go path at Dine College. “I had to quit school and support my family. But I knew I’d return one day. I kept to the teachings of my grandparents with respect to healing and balance.”

Teller grew up in an alcoholic environment, but a very loving one. At Diné College, Teller followed academic cues from the most qualified people in his life - teachers, advisers and administrators. By the time Teller graduated, he was already well-respected in family circles.

“He never gave up and that in itself says a lot,” Tonya Teller, Travis’ wife of more than a decade. Tonya Teller works as an administrator at Diné College. “He wants to continue his education and that is another positive thing.”

Added Teller, “Diné College has formally given me a foundation and an opportunity and furthered my identity. It has given me a true understanding of what is sacred in this world.”

Diné College opened in 1968 as Navajo Community College. It is a two-year tribally controlled community college. The 2017 graduating class at the college consisted of a little more than 170 students.

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