

## Writing conference celebrates Navajo voices, history

Written by By Rick Abasta For the Sun  
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**The two-day conference included workshops, speakers**

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Meticulously crafted Navajo stories, spanning many genres, were the focus of the Hazhó'ó Hólne' Writing Conference, held March 17-18 in Window Rock. The event took place at the Navajo Nation Museum March 17, and at the Department of Diné Education Auditorium March 18.

The conference brought together writers from across the country for a two-day experience, billed as, "Food for the Body, Mind, and Spirit: Creative Juices for Creative Expressions."

The Middlebury Bread Loaf School of English; Middlebury Bread Loaf Teacher Network; Next Generation Leadership Network; La Casa Roja; Navajo Nation Museum; Department of Diné Education; Community Outreach and Patient Empowerment; Write to Change; and Navajo Community Health Outreach sponsored the conference.

The event featured concurrent workshops, which focused on a range of topics, including: bullet journaling and poetry slams; water and life; Navajo traditional songs, stories and prayers about food; nature journal drawing and writing; newspaper journalism; motivation; reading and writing blogs; open mics; poetry; letter writing; human perceptions; graphic design; theater; and further subjects.

Acclaimed Navajo writers Rex Lee Jim, Dr. Irvin Morris, Orlando White, Lemanuel Loley, and others shared insight into the creative writing process. Writing exercises, open mic time and a poetry night allowed writers to share their work.

### VOICES OF SUPPORT

Ceci Lewis of the Middlebury Bread Loaf School of English welcomed writers to the conference March 17, informing attendees that she has worked with Jim for more than 20 years, providing workshops and other activities on and off of the Navajo Nation.

"The Bread Loaf School of English is a magical place for many of us," Lewis said. "Rex and I met in 1996 on Bread Loaf Mountain. He was from northern Arizona and I am from southern Arizona."

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She praised Dixie Goswami of the Bread Loaf School of English as a visionary mentor who influenced the work that has been done by Middlebury and others on the Navajo Nation.

Nurturing the next generation of Navajo writers and leaders has always been the school's purpose. Goswami was unable to attend the conference, but sent her hopes and dreams.

"We are the carriers for her today," Lewis said, adding that Goswami was standing by on the phone for any questions.

Dr. Douglas Wood from the Ford Foundation offered some words of encouragement. The Ford Foundation sponsored the writing conference and has supported causes of social equity and justice through the years.

"It is an honor to be here on the Navajo Nation," Wood said. "The Ford Foundation's motto is, 'Working with visionaries on the frontlines of social change worldwide.' We are honored to support the next generation of leadership at the Ford Foundation."

He added that the foundation is committed to fostering the next generation's leadership and civic engagement.

"It is a very important time in our country and around the world when it comes to social movements and young people," Wood said. "It has always been young people who have led social movements."

Jim, former vice president of the Navajo Nation and the conference's keynote speaker, is knowledgeable on the subject of youth leadership, having worked in that area for years with young Navajos across the nation.

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Jim turned to youth leaders and parents for input on the conference's title. For a conference centered on the importance of language and identity, choosing the name was a serious consideration.

"The name of this conference is, 'Hazhó'ó Hólne' Writing Conference,' carefully crafting language or carefully crafting or molding and shaping your stories," Jim said. "Hazhó'ó hólne' has a lot of connotations."

The idea of hazhó'ó is part of who you are as a Navajo, he said, adding that something as simple as introducing yourself can carry the weight of generations past.

Jim identified himself as a member of the Red House Clan, born for Red Running Into the Water Clan. Towering House Clan are his maternal grandfathers and Mexican Clan are his paternal grandfathers.

Common sense teaching from his grandmother allowed Jim to learn early on about the importance of being careful with his language and being kind to people.

"Nizaad baholya [take care of your language]," were the words of advice from his grandmother that laid the foundation for Jim's academic and professional career as a writer and poet.

"Be careful about the words you choose when engaging others in dialogue, that is so important for us to consider," Jim said at the conference. "Think first before you speak."

Jim is currently working with Ceci Lewis on "Stories of Walking," a book focused on reclaiming rhetorical sovereignty.

"One way to conquer and continue to subjugate a people is to replace your own stories over the top of the people you have conquered," he said, underscoring the importance of indigenous storytelling.

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Jim said the works of Dr. Jennifer Nez Denetdale and her research on Chief Manuelito is a fine example for Navajo writers and the new standard for scholars of all ages.

“We need to reclaim our voices,” Jim said, emphasizing once more the purpose of that weekend’s events. “We need to strengthen those voices and that’s what this conference is about.”

***For more information, visit: [www.middlebury.edu](http://www.middlebury.edu) or [www.copeprogram.org](http://www.copeprogram.org) .***

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