

# Having the Best of Two Worlds

by Candice Yazzie

**Y**a'ateeh (Greetings)! My name is Candice Yazzie. I am Diné (Navajo), Salt People Clan and born for the Red Running into Water Clan. My home is on the Navajo reservation. I am currently pursuing my Master's Degree in Social Work, at Washington University in St. Louis (WUSTL), with an individualized concentration in "Criminal and Juvenile Justice in Tribal Communities." I am honored and humbled to be a Buder Scholar. I would like to thank the Kathryn M. Buder Foundation and the American Indian Graduate Center for giving me the opportunity to improve my professional and academia ambitions with the George Warren Brown School of Social Work. With your financial assistance, I am empowered and equipped to create positive social change for all tribal communities within Indian Country.

I have two wonderful parents, Kenneth and Brenda Yazzie, who raised me to be strong and to never give up in life. I have four siblings; Jeannette, Kimberly, Kendrick and Breanna. In addition, I am blessed to have five charming nieces and nephews, whom I admire very much. Home, family, relatives and mentors have become lifelong friends, coaches and professors assisting me to navigate adolescence and adulthood expansion. Home is where I can truly express my personal identity and humanity. It is the only place I can draw strength, wisdom, knowledge and pride, as a Diné woman. My family continues to uplift, empower and encourage me to earn my Master's Degree and return to my tribal community to implement positive change.

As a second year graduate student attending a university, away from tribal communities, I've experienced various struggles, difficulties and loneliness. "Having the Best of Two Worlds" begins with my journey living between two worlds, the world of western education and the Diné Philosophy of Life. During this transition, I have experience a full classroom of Native students at Haskell Indian Nations University (HINU) and a full classroom of non-Native students at WUSTL. Transitioning from an



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Intertribal college to a predominantly non-Native institution was a culture shock for me and created a very difficult situation to overcome. I felt like I was on the outside looking in and became isolated and disconnected from everything and everyone.

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As my life moves forward, I begin to realize that one of the biggest disadvantages of living away from a tribally-enriched environment is that it is hard to maintain cultural identity because I am no longer surrounded by people that exemplify my cultural individuality. It has been hard, but I realize how important it is to keep

my identity alive. The second disadvantage is when I go home I notice how I've been affected by living in the outside world. I'm not the person I would be if I stayed. I transformed! Living and growing in the outside world is a sacrifice but worth it.

Bridging the gaps between two worlds can be extremely difficult, especially if you live in one, and favor one over the other. The morals I have learned, from both cultures, have molded my understanding into a more holistic worldview. I utilize my corn pollen and say my prayers every morning before I start my day, burn cedar when I suffer negative possessions and wear my traditional outfits and moccasins when it's appropriate to do so. However, when I get dressed, fix my hair, talk in class or at work, I begin to recognize that I act more like my non-Native friends, as opposed to socializing among my Navajo people. Before leaving the Navajo reservation, I always favored my traditional beliefs regarding how I should present myself, which hindered making connections within the western society. Years later, I find myself reflecting on this overwhelming journey and ask myself, "How in the world did I do it?"

Navajo people are very traditional when it comes to the Diné Philosophy of Life. At a young age, I went through the Navajo Puberty Ceremony, which is a coming-of-age ceremony. The ceremony is intense, due to the amount of work contributed by family and relatives. It is a Blessing Way Ceremony that embraces maturity, responsibility, independence, endurance and beauty for a young Navajo girl. This transition into maturity offers guidance from a generation of mothers, sisters, aunts, grandmothers and great-grandmothers. This method has taught me that Navajo women have the strength to grow and overcome obstacles, challenges and provides life lessons. I can attest to the innate qualities in becoming a strong and resilient woman. The empowering ceremony has paved my way for success in higher education.

The skills and abilities established throughout my adolescent years have proceeded into another passage in my life. Sports! A trip to Haskell Indian Nations University (HINU) has unlocked another door of opportunity. I pay tribute and respect to former HINU Women's Basketball Coach, Phill Homeratha, who granted me the opportunity to have a spot on his basketball



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team. Coach Homeratha introduced me to the collegiate student-athletic regime. My journey in higher education began with one phone call from the late Coach Phil Homaratha, a memory I will never forget. During this stage in my life, I have accomplished my dream and goal of playing collegiate basketball and having the opportunity to compete at that level. This experience built a variety of relationships with peers, colleagues, teammates, professors and mentors.

Life at HINU opened many doors of opportunities such, as earning a Bachelor's degree in Indigenous and American Indian Studies and granted numerous internships and seminars related to Native American issues and concepts. During the season of 2010-2011, I was honored to receive the Midlands Collegiate Athlete Conference (MCAC) Scholar-Athlete Award, which rewards you for maintaining a high GPA as a student-athlete, within multiple consecutive semesters. In addition, our basketball team made its first appearance in the National

me through difficult times. I recall coming home to her home-cooked meals and warm, heartfelt hugs, which she has for me each time I return home. No matter how far I go in life or how far I am away from home, she reminds me that my strength comes from home, which is the foundation of our culture, our language and all that it encompasses. "Don't ever forget that", she exclaims. She has taught me how to utilize the fireplace for strength and endurance to overcome what life has to offer. Around the fireplace, I can pray and reconnect with the holy people who provide the steps to succeed. Along the way, I made visits with traditional people and mentors, for direction and prayers. I was able to honor my Navajo female role and responsibilities with the ceremonies that were conducted on my behalf. I restored my relationship with Mother Earth, Father Sky and the holy deities that exist within the four sacred mountains of the Navajo Reservation. This is home, a place where I come from and a land that resonates with me.

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Association of Intercollegiate Athletes (NAIA) basketball tournament. Thanks to outstanding teammates, a remarkable coach and multiple recognitions to the team.

One of the critical challenges I faced, during my time at Haskell, took place my last semester. I had 21 credit-hours remaining on my class schedule and, in order for me to graduate, I needed to complete every course within that semester. At the time, I was working part-time for the American Indian Record Repository in Lenexa, Kansas. In addition, I was approached by the athletic department and I was told I had one more semester of eligibility to compete, so I tried out for the HINU Cross Country Team and was selected. At the time, I did not know how I was going to juggle all this in one semester, but I was very determined to graduate so I had to find my way.

With hesitation in sight, I felt that I had to make a trip home. During times like this, I turn to what I have utilized for many years, empowerment of the Navajo people. Navajo women are the core of Navajo culture. Thus, they continue to have strong ties with their children, offering advice, teaching, coaching and mentoring. My mother is a strong woman. She is the number one supporter in my life, who I depend upon to help me get

I am prepared to take the next step and envision what I had to do to make it happen or destroy what I had begun. Navajo culture begins and ends with me because it determines the life I choose for myself. I have a strong, cultural foundation, including mentors and traditional people, who offer teachings, prayers, ceremonies and cultural knowledge. They always appreciate that I come to them for advice and that I take full responsibility of my life, by acknowledging the Navajo culture, teachings and language. To this day, they continue to motivate me and empower me as a true Diné woman. I was once told that, when you meet the Creator half way, the Creator will take care of the rest. As a result, I earned my Bachelor's Degree in Indigenous and American Indian Studies with high honors, earned my first NAIA Cross Country 2nd Team All-Conference and went from part-time to full-time status at work. I share this with you to let you know that anything is possible if you set your mind to it. The journey starts and ends with you.

My interest in the legal sector began when I started working with the St. Louis City Trial Public Defender's system as a practicum student. My plan is to become a tribal advocate in the tribal, legal and social service sector. Research conducted on American Indian, Alaskan

Native and other minority populations, indicates disproportionate rates of criminalization and oppression by the criminal and juvenile systems. This practice has allowed me to explore the legal system within a larger metropolitan area. I was able to understand my role as a social worker, which requires knowledge of law, legal defense methods, law enforcement, parole, probation and mental health treatment programs.

As I sit by myself today, I think of all the young, talented Native Americans beginning their pursuit of higher education. These individuals come from tribal reservations and are aware of limited opportunities, lack of social and economic resources and disparities that exist within their boundaries. My point in sharing my upbringing is to help you understand that anything is possible, if you set your mind to it. To tell you that hope and possibilities are within your reach. The journey begins with you. When that opportunity arises, when the

time comes, no matter what life throws at you, remember to stand tall and strong. Everything that is happening right now is happening for a reason. Don't run from the struggle, it's there to make you stronger. Have faith!

I truly believe that our cultural identity is inherited from our ancestors and carried in the history of Native people. Native people fought for our existence in this country and we must follow in their footsteps. My cultural responsibility is to continue the legacy of my Navajo history and culture. A Navajo woman living alongside the dominant society, requires navigating two worlds. I am developing strategies and mechanisms to increase my chances of success in western education. My goal is to ensure that my tribal identity remains intact and includes world views as part of obtaining my Master's Degree. I plan to enroll in a Juris Doctor program, during my time at Washington University in St. Louis and hope to work in a legal setting when I complete my studies. ♦



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