

Social Work in Indian Country

by *Kellie Szczepaniec*

Before I stepped foot on a college campus, I knew exactly what I was going to do with my life. At least I thought I knew. My freshman year, I began college enrolled as an engineer. My choice was easy, my choice was final. However, like many students, my plans soon changed.

There was never any question of whether or not I would attend college. My parents decided from a young age that my sisters and I would get degrees no matter what it took. They recognized the importance and supported a college education throughout our combative junior high and high school years. Luckily, their continued encouragement got the better of us and, with their guidance, we soon understood the value in obtaining a degree as well. I chose engineering because it seemed interesting, important and challenging.

I chose to attend the University of Notre Dame because of its excellent academic programs; I would be a Native female engineer graduating from a prestigious university. I knew my education was not going to be cheap. Fortunately, I was able to finance my Bachelor's degree through financial aid, scholarship monies, personal savings, part-time jobs and parental support.

My struggle with engineering was reflected in my GPA, as well as my happiness. I needed to do something different in my life, so I began volunteering. During that first year, I discovered what my real passion was: serving disproportionately disadvantaged populations. I began tutoring Native youth and spending time with individuals with disabilities. When I was doing these two activities I was at my best. After my first semester, I dropped engineering and began the study of psychology. I was determined to work with people.

In my subsequent years at Notre Dame, I saw myself gravitating towards jobs that alleviated the social injustices that are commonly found among minority populations. I worked with abused women and children, with women who recognized their substance abuse problems and sought help and with Native children, teaching them healthy ways of living in 'two worlds.' I saw first-hand



Kellie Szczepaniec and her parents, Paul and Lori, at Washington University in St. Louis, on her graduation day.

and discussed the social, economic and political realities of Native Nations and Native people across the country. I was surprised at how easily others looked at tribal problems and simply turned a blind eye, but I knew I would not be one of them. Upon graduation, I planned to combat the harsh realities many tribes face – whether it was deteriorating health status or health conditions, stunted economic development or unrealized tribal sovereignty. My eyes were opened to the ever expanding and often ignored circumstances Native people were experiencing and had no idea where to start.

However vast and ambiguous this plan was, it did require more education – a Master's in Social Work. Washington University in St. Louis is home to one of the best social work schools in the country – the Brown School of Social Work. When I discovered the Kathryn M. Buder Center for American Indian Studies, located in the Brown School, I knew this was the school for me. The Buder Center offers scholarships, support and opportuni-



Kellie Szczepaniec (center) with her sisters, Kristin (left) and Ashley (right).

ties for Native students who wish to pursue a Master's in Social Work and intend to work in Indian Country.

The Buder Center recruits qualified American Indian scholars, develops curriculum, conducts research and engages in policy development that directly impacts Indian Country. The Center prepares future American Indian leaders to practice in tribal and urban settings, making significant contributions to the health, wellness and the sustained future of Indian Country. I not only chose this school because of the financial support available through the Buder Center, but also because of the social support and academic programs offered to Native students. The combination of these three things allowed me to realize my academic potential, surrounded by students like myself – dedicated to the improvement of Indian Country.

Throughout my years as a Buder Scholar, I met some of the most committed people I know and took classes from some of the most mindful and intellectual leaders in the field of social work. I became Co-chair of the American Indian Student Association and the Annual Washington University Pow Wow.

During my final semester at the Brown School, I worked as a Research Assistant at the Health Communications Research Lab. While there, I developed tar-



Kellie (far right) with fellow Co-chairs of the 2009 Washington University in St. Louis Pow Wow.

geted colorectal cancer resources for tribal organizations. Through this experience, I learned that targeting health materials is one of the most important steps in reducing health disparities among minorities. I was able to utilize and expand my social work knowledge in a public health setting and saw the importance of building a strong relationship between social work and public health.

Today, I cannot help but remember my plans six years ago. I had no idea this is where I would be today, but I cannot see myself as anything but a social worker. American Indian leaders are greatly needed in the field of social work. We need to be the ones making the big decisions about the social, economic and political future of our people. Changing my mind about what I wanted to do was one of the best decisions of my life. Equipped with education I know I can make a difference. ♦

(Kellie Szczepaniec is a member of the Seneca Nation of Indians, Hawk Clan. She is currently working as a Research Assistant at the Kathryn M. Buder Center for American Indian Studies at Washington University in St. Louis. She received her B.A. in Psychology and Gender Studies, from the University of Notre Dame, and her M.S.W. from Washington University in St. Louis. Kellie was awarded an AIGC fellowship while pursuing her Master's Degree.)

Throughout my years as a Buder Scholar, I met some of the most committed people I know and took classes from some of the most mindful and intellectual leaders in the field of social work.