

Cultivating Leadership through Identity

by Sarah M. Nelson

Last year, when I was preparing to attend graduate school at the Brown School of Social Work at Washington University in St. Louis, I imagined the most difficult things I would encounter included impromptu quizzes, group projects from hell and professors that had no remorse. I never anticipated that the most difficult obstacle I would have to contend with would be me.

Prior to becoming a Buder Scholar at the Kathryn M. Buder Center for American Indian Studies, I had limited my voice as a Native woman. Being blonde, pale and covered in freckles, thanks to my Finnish, Swedish and Irish ancestry, I had no problem fitting in as an all-American white girl. No one would ever question whether I was Native or not and I chose to limit this information to only my closest friends and colleagues. In my family, the celebration of our Anishinabbe lineage has been limited. Instead, in most of our actions and most of the words we speak, we seem to quite easily forget about the seven generations before us and find other reasons to celebrate.

When offered the opportunity to be a Buder Scholar, through the Kathryn M. Buder Center for American Indian Studies, I knew I could never change my family and their beliefs, but I knew it was time to change myself. I would take this opportunity to step up and advocate for other Natives who were afraid to speak their words because they were not proud of their background. I knew that this task would be difficult but, with my training in both the Master's in Social Work and Master's in Public Health programs, I would be ready to take it on. I am currently one year into the program and gaining more passion every day, for the things that I do. I have taken leadership positions, as the Washington University Pow Wow Co-chair and as the Secretary for the American Indian Student Association. These positions allow me to expand my own personal leadership skills,



Sarah M. Nelson

while enhancing the lives of other Native students. I have maintained a 4.0 GPA, while working two jobs and conducting research. Had I not learned how to defend my thoughts and actions as a Native woman, I am not sure I would have accomplished so much.

As my future unfolds, I am sure I will run into more conflicts with my identity. My hope is to someday become a leader in American Indian health communication and education models. I know there will be many times when my research practices and methodology will be questioned, simply because I don't have the skin pigment or hair color someone expects when they hear I am of Chippewa decent. As my confidence and comfort level about my heritage and my skills increase, the ease and trust of the communities and individuals I work with will grow, cultivating the strong relationships we need for Indian Country to flourish. ♦

(Sarah Nelson currently attends Washington University in St. Louis and is a 2013 MSW/IMPH Candidate, at the Brown School of Social Work.

The Kathryn M. Buder Center for American Indian Studies provides academic advancement opportunities to future American Indian leaders interested in making social work and public health advancements throughout Indian Country. For more information, visit <http://buder.wustl.edu>.)