

## A New Tradition

By: Harrison Boling (Comanche)

Every day after school they are waiting for me, neatly stacked on the kitchen counter: smiling faces, stately buildings, stories of successful alums, the college brochures entice me with their promises of a bright future. In less than two years I will be attending one of them, becoming the fourth person from my mom's Comanche family to do so. Thinking about college, I focus on the typical questions, such as the size, academic difficulty, curriculum, and location of schools. I ask myself *which* school I might want to attend, but never *if* I want to attend. For my grandfather, it was very different. With an unprecedented perseverance to earn a degree, my grandpa replaced an old tradition of low paying jobs and financial stress with a new tradition of college education and a successful profession. Many Native American families, including my own extended family, struggle to pay for necessities on a daily basis. Those who find their way to a college degree have a good chance of improving the standard of living not only for themselves, but for many future generations.

There are over 4,300 degree-granting two and four-year colleges in the US (National Center for Education Statistics "Fast Facts"), offering a seemingly vast array of higher education options available to all Americans, and the college participation rate is increasing for most racial and ethnic groups. Yet, while over the past 27 years the percentage of 18- to 24-year olds enrolled in college has shown double-digit increases for Whites, Blacks and Hispanics, there was no increase over the same period in the percentage of Native Americans enrolled in college (National Center for Education

Statistics “Publications 2010”). In 2007 the median income for all households in the US was \$50,740, but it was only \$35,343 for Native American households (Bishaw 3). The percentage of Native families living in poverty in 2007 was 25.3%, higher than any other racial or ethnic group (Bishaw 20). This alarming trend of increasing low-income existence threatens the welfare of the Comanches and other tribes across the country. The trend can be reversed by increasing the number of first-generation Native Americans who graduate from college. Encouraging Native youth like my grandfather to start a new tradition based on higher education would strengthen tribal communities and promote prosperity for generations to come.

My Grandpa Clifton and his brother grew up in southern Oklahoma. Their father, cursed by gambling and alcohol addiction, abandoned the family. My great-grandma was struck with tuberculosis, and my grandpa and great-uncle were sent to the Fort Sill Indian School. Anxious to improve his circumstances, at the age of sixteen Clifton dropped out of high school and enlisted in the Marines. In the 1950’s and 1960’s, an eighth-grade education was considered doing well for Native Americans (Teicher). However, after Clifton finished his service, he took advantage of the GI Bill that supplied him with a paid education, and graduated with a bachelor’s degree from the University of Oklahoma. For 12 years he worked as a television repairman to support his young family, but he also pursued his dream of better opportunities by earning a law degree at night school. His perseverance led to the first professional job in his family’s history. It was this dedication that inspired my mom’s education, which in turn inspires my own education. For our family it took only one person to start a new tradition.

Why don't more Comanche youth take the path to a college degree? A common reason for their choice to not go or drop out is the difficulty of the transition from local community life to life on campus far away. The culture of some colleges is far too different from Native communities to permit a young person to adapt quickly. Elaine Kasch, supervisor of Indian education for the Flagstaff Unified School District, notes that Native American students living away from home "have to balance living in two worlds constantly" (qtd. in Teicher).

Because of their small population on most campuses, Native college students may have trouble feeling a sense of camaraderie with other students. Lori LaTender, program director at Menominee (Wisconsin) Indian High School, comments that at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, a university with 40,000 students, "You're lucky if you see another Native American" (qtd. in Ziff). Cedar Kakkak, a mentor at the College of Menominee Nation who graduated from UW-Madison, observes, "[T]he intensity of coursework can be really overwhelming" at a large state university (qtd. in Ziff).

The College of Menominee Nation serves over 600 students, 80% of whom are Native American. "The tribe wanted a tribal college because they were so concerned about our students going to mainstream institutions and coming back a failure," says Verna Fowler, President of the College (qtd. in Ziff). With 170 births per 1,000 teens, Menominee County has the highest teen pregnancy rate in Wisconsin. The school allows mothers such as Leona Dixon to bring in their infant children so that they can attend class. Dixon is grateful for the opportunity she was given. "You really can't find that opportunity at any other university" (qtd. in Ziff). College staffers help students in ways

larger universities can't or don't, such as providing snacks to hungry students and calling home when they don't show up for class (Ziff).

I hope to help both my tribe and the larger Native American community increase the number of Native youth who graduate college in several ways. First, I will support the candidates for tribal office who want to increase funding for the Comanche Nation College and improve the student services offered there. Tribal colleges offer Native youth the opportunity to start college near home, which avoids the stress of moving far away. The College administration should pay particular attention to successful tribal colleges such as the College of Menominee Nation, which has increased its enrollment by offering services to mothers and other personal attention. Comanche youth who start out at the Comanche Nation College have a better chance of making a successful transition to a four-year college and earning a degree there.

I will also help support Native youth in higher education by choosing a college that has an active Native American community on campus. A Native group at college offers a place to come to meet other Native youth, discuss issues and offer support to each other. An active Native group can also inform the rest of the campus community on Native American culture and concerns, which could help break down stereotypes that are barriers to Native student success. This summer I will attend College Horizons, a precollege workshop for Native American high school students, and I expect to learn more about mainstream colleges which have programs for Native students.

Finally, I want to be a mentor for Native high school youth while in college. As a mentor, I would spend time with Native youth who don't have any family members who attended college. I would like to encourage middle school and high school students to

stay in school and make a plan for higher education. I believe that more Native Americans can keep and honor tribal traditions while also making college education a new tradition.

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