

Whisper n Thunder

The whisper of Native American stories, the thunder of stories that demand to be told.

Dreams Do Come True

- AIEF, in behalf of Aaron Sparks

Are you an American Indian student in the United States or Alaska? Someone who dreams of a college education and hopes for a brighter future? If so, this story is for you.



Aaron Sparks was a student full of hopes and dreams too. A proud member of the White Clay Nation "A-AH-NI-NEN," he wants to tell his story so that other Native students can see that dreams really do come true. Aaron survived many challenges on the way to earning not one but three college degrees.

Prior to college, Aaron lived in Harlem, Montana, which is about 40 miles south of the Canadian border and close to the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation. Aaron grew up with two younger brothers and his mother. As a teenager, Aaron stayed in school and stayed focused until he met his goal: a high school diploma. Aaron knew that a high school diploma was the key to his next goal: a college education.

Growing up in a community that was "less privileged" and that held both "financial and academic challenges" made Aaron "realize the value of a college education," he says. Financial instability was a major obstacle that often discouraged Aaron – but each semester he stuck with his dream and found a way to cover his tuition and books, rent, and food. Aaron says, "There is no substitute for hard work, perseverance, and the benefits you receive from it!!" And part of Aaron's solution was applying for [American Indian Education Foundation](#) (AIEF) scholarships, which he did year after year.

Another challenge that Aaron faced was being a "first generation student," the first in his family to even consider college, and he felt there was no one he could talk with about it. Having a support system in place is really important for Native students, and many turn to guidance counselors and role models in their community. This is true whether deciding whether to attend college or adjusting to the rigors of college life and life off the reservation.

So whatever happened to Aaron Sparks?

Aaron did not become a statistic. He did not become one of the 22% of Native students who enter college but drop out. He became one of the 11% of Native students who stay in college until they graduate. Aaron attended Montana State University and later transferred to the University of Montana, where he graduated with a Bachelor's degree in exercise physiology/health and human performance in May, 2009. Aaron took his place among the 95% of AIEF students who complete the college year(s) for which their

scholarships are awarded. Aaron also went on to complete his Master's degree in May 2011, and in May 2012, he graduated with a Doctorate in Physical Therapy.

These are life-changing achievements, but Aaron's dream didn't stop there. He wanted to become a doctor to help American Indian people with their health problems and to "rehabilitate victims of the prevalent health concerns" in Native populations. In fact, Aaron couldn't wait to get started. While still in college, he got a part-time internship at Fort Belknap Indian Health Services, which helped him financially but more importantly, gave him a new appreciation of the problems faced daily on the reservations. This made his desire to serve his people even stronger. He wants to build trusted relationships with patients, encourage them to play an active role in their own self-care, and help them develop a desire to be healthy. He also wants to promote exercise through local basketball camps for youth, group fitness classes, and men's and women's sports leagues on the reservations.

Are you noticing a theme here? **Aaron had dreams and stuck with them. He didn't give up. And it wasn't all for him.** Aaron stuck it out through the hard work, the adjustments to campus life, and the financial roadblocks because college was a means to an end, to a dream bigger than just him. Today, Aaron feels that the help he can give his people "has no bounds and the possibilities are endless." And this is only true because he took the steps needed to make this dream a reality. If you are a student reading this story, or you know a student, this is Aaron's message to you: "Only when the desire for change comes from within you will it truly be successful."

AIEF is a program of National Relief Charities. To learn more about AIEF scholarships, please call 866-866-8642.

Links:

AIEF: www.aiefprograms.org

NRC: www.nrcprograms.org

Banner Graphic: <http://www.firstpeople.us/>

Whisper n Thunder Winds Scholarship Application: www.whispernthunder.org/WINDS_APPLICATION.html

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