

Whisper n Thunder

The Whisper of Native American stories, the Thunder of stories that demand to be told

Graduating College & Working on the Rez

- Helen Oliff for National Relief Charities

It was late July and Kelly was still interviewing for a job. A recent college graduate, she wanted a teaching position. At the last minute, a learning center on the Navajo Reservation offered Kelly a teaching opportunity. Navajo is her home.

Like Kelly, many Native American students leave the reservation to attend college, often an emotionally wrenching choice. Many who leave do so knowing they want to return home and help their tribes after graduating. With reservation jobs limited though, some work off-reservation for years before getting the opportunity to work at home near their families. Kelly was one of the lucky ones; her opportunity came quickly.



Many Native American students also begin their college journey with an unfaltering conviction to see it through, come what may. I had a chance to visit with Kelly and ask about her years in college. She said there was never a time she felt that she would not graduate... because “quitting was never an option.” This is a typical characteristic of the students selected for scholarships by the [American Indian Education Foundation \(AIEF\)](#), a program of [National Relief Charities](#).

Nice to Be Remembered



Kelly also said AIEF played a big part in her college success. All through college, she received three scholarships a year, each one critical to her college funding – but AIEF was different, she said. Curious about this, I asked, “Different how?”

“AIEF did not just give me a check and then go away,” Kelly said. “They sent me care packages in the mail, called me regularly and sent me gifts for

Christmas. They even asked a senior at my college to be my mentor” on campus. That senior was also an AIEF scholarship recipient.

We know this extra support really makes a difference for Native American students. Kelly shared this was especially true for her in her first year. “My freshman year was my worst year in college. I was lonely, had no one to talk to, was in the dorm alone, and it was nice to be remembered “by AIEF.”

Now on the road to self-sufficiency, Kelly tells other Native American students AIEF is a gift that helped change her life. “Now I am teaching on my reservation and I have my own apartment. I was surprised I could afford to do this.” Kelly also shares her experiences of college and a Costa Rica internship with her first-grade class, so that children “on the rez can learn to walk in both worlds” (on and off the reservation).

A Brighter Future

The goal of our AIEF scholarships is to increase access to college education for Native Americans living in remote reservation communities. Kelly’s journey certainly echoes this and shows that education is a key to a brighter future. With this in mind, we offer heartfelt congratulations to Kelly and to all our AIEF scholars, including nearly 200 new students receiving scholarships for the 2014-15 academic year.

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