



Myth or Reality: College is Free for American Indians

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By Rodney Trahan

College is not a given for every hopeful in the United States. While 28 percent nationwide hold a college degree, only 13 percent of American Indians do, and in some states, only 7 to 11 percent of Native students hold a college degree.

Why the disparity? There are many barriers, seemingly simple, and we should all care about changing them and supporting youth because they are our future.

Through no fault of their own, American Indian students are overlooked for scholarships. Often, this is due to less than a 4.0 grade point average, or lack of information about available scholarships, or the confronting belief that college is not an option for them economically. Imagine having a dream of helping your people and being unable to fulfill it because you are unable to afford college.

After growing up on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation in Montana, I knew scholarships were my only pathway to college. Today, this has come full circle and I'm giving back by helping to raise college funds for other would-be Native graduates, in my role as VP of Development for Partnership With Native Americans (PWNA).

For nearly 30 years, PWNA has been serving Indian reservations – much of that time while in Elkwood and now from their office in the Culpeper Business Center. What I admire about PWNA is their passion and commitment to improving quality of life on Indian reservations with the highest need in the U.S.

And let's talk about that need. One in four Indian families lives with food insecurity or in a food desert, some an hour from a grocery store. The groceries that are local and affordable on the reservations are also less healthy and fuel the highest rates of diabetes and youth obesity in the country. Up to half of Native children are overweight or obese by the time they turn 10. A third of Native children are growing up in poverty, many in communities with Third World conditions.

The good news is, education is a hand up and out of cyclical poverty. One of our many scholarship students, Lawrence Wright, Jr., saw this and changed his life through our scholarships.

An American Indian from Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo in New Mexico, and a U.S. Marine Corps veteran, Lawrence enlisted, served 3 tours in Iraq and earned a Purple Heart, all before college. After taking on shrapnel, facing two close calls with IEDs, and being shot at by sniper fire, Lawrence was awarded the Purple Heart and returned home to train and serve in law enforcement. But now, he wants to do more, so he's pursuing a Master's degree to fight counter-terrorism, and with his VA benefits exhausted, he turns to AIEF for funding. He shares, "A big part of my motivation comes from my brothers [Marines] who sacrificed their lives in Iraq. I try to make something of myself... that's how I honor them."

Many people believe that American Indians go to college for free, but they do not. But as Lawrence points out, "Most tribes have very little funding to assist their tribal members. We need more support, resources and scholarships like AIEF for the Native youth."

AIEF – the American Indian Education Fund – is a PWNA program that annually funds 200 to 250 scholarships, as well as college grants, laptops and other supplies for Indian students. We also mentor these students, so 90 to 95 percent of them complete their college year, ensuring that donor funds are put to good use. Our scholarships are open to American Indians nationwide who meet our simple criteria, including those living right here in Virginia.

Education is a key to self-sufficiency and sustainable tribal economies, which is good for all of us. In this, we all have a chance to help create brighter futures and address the Third World conditions right here in the U.S. I would welcome a call from anyone wanting to learn more. You can reach me or my staff at 800-416-8102 or visit www.nativepartnership.org.