

Fostering mentorship

Innovative program helps Native American students RISE

BY SHANNON LOWRY



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A welcome package arrives with a backpack, toiletries and school supplies. A box full of snacks lands in your dorm room at midterms to make those midnight study sessions less of a grind. A card or an email sprinkled with words of understanding and encouragement is waiting in your mailbox. A phone call comes in from someone who just wants to hear how you’re doing.

For any college student, folks who believe in you and care packages matter a lot. Yet for many American Indian college students, these simple acts of kindness and support may hold the difference between attaining a college degree or returning to their reservations empty-handed.

Consider these statistics: Only 13 percent of Native American students graduate from college. Thirty-five percent of Native American children grow up in poverty. From 30 to 70 percent of these children drop out of school, depending on the reservation community. Education is a pillar upon which self-sufficiency and a better quality of life stand. Yet reservation schools chronically lack nearly every basic resource needed to help children learn and stay engaged.

Geographical isolation, crushing poverty and inadequate funds and resources, along with limited employment opportunities, are just a few of the realities many Native American tribes face.

The four directions — north, south, east and west — hold special significance in many American Indian cultures. For example, the Lakota Sioux believe that:

- **North** — where the cold winds blow — is associated with hardship, but also with cleansing and endurance.
- **South** — where the sun’s rays are most powerful — is associated with growth, warmth and ability.
- **East** — the direction from which the sun rises — is a place of peace, new life and light.
- **West** — where the sun sets — signifies not only the end of life and darkness,

but also where the Thunderbird lives, bringing vital rain.

Caring people offering encouragement and support converge from all four directions to help American Indian students seeking a higher education through the American Indian Education Fund and the Four Directions Development Program, a leadership and mentoring initiative.

AIEF and 4D are administered by the nonprofit Partnership With Native Americans. The holistic programs help participants enhance their skills and abilities to benefit their individual career paths and support their lifelong desire to serve others.

Rafael Tapia Jr., PWNA vice president of programs and a member of the Pascua Yaqui Tribe in southern Arizona, said that AIEF targets American Indian students who are in the 2.0-3.5 grade point average range for scholarships to help them attend college, a technical school or a community college. It provides nearly \$450,000 in undergraduate and graduate school funding annually to about 225 to 250 students.

“Nearly half of AIEF scholarship recipients are the first to attend college in their family,” he said. “It is well documented that the tremendous culture change, campus challenges and financial strain can gravely impact a student’s success in his or her first year of higher education, so AIEF offers one-on-one mentoring to support all scholarship recipients. In addition to tutoring and emergency assistance, students also receive regular care packages of school supplies, as well as holiday gifts. Typically, only about 20 percent of Native Americans who start college complete their first year, yet more than 90 percent of AIEF scholarship recipients do.” As students complete a year of college, they apply for AIEF scholarships for the next year, with students earning support from Partnership With Native Americans through graduation and into advanced degree programs.

A global leader in promoting a diverse workforce with a commitment to reaching out to underserved communities, PepsiCo Inc. — along with other companies — helps by pro-



2016-2017 PepsiCo RISE mentors (from left) in Plano, Texas: David Elston, Enrique Michel, Kimberly Koskay, Meagan Peeler, Rachel Davison, Mills Weinmann, Whitney Tisdale, Daniella Montero, Monica Ricard and Michael Matthews

viding program funding through organizations such as the PepsiCo Foundation. Just as important, PepsiCo employees contribute their hearts and minds to mentoring AIEF scholarship students through a program started by the RISE employee resource group. In the past two years, RISE — in collaboration with PWNA — has mentored over 40 AIEF scholarship students from more than 30 Native American tribes who are pursuing undergraduate and graduate degrees.

Impacting the community

Adonis Trujillo, 26, who hails from the Taos Pueblo tribe, is a second-year MBA candidate at The University of Arizona in Tucson. For more than 1,000 years, his tribe has lived on the same lands around its ancient pueblo dwellings in northern New Mexico.



Adonis Trujillo

“I moved to Tucson and was able to get into the graduate program. But, coming from out of state, it was expensive,” he said. “I looked into the American Indian Education Fund program and sent in an application. I am grateful they stepped up at the right time to help with a scholarship. I come from a low economic status.

I became a PepsiCo RISE mentee, and they sent care packages to me throughout the year. One of the mentors was an MBA graduate himself. It was a pleasure to meet him. I was surprised [at] how rigorous the MBA program was at times. He was able to relate to the struggles I was going through at the time.”

For Trujillo, achieving an MBA isn’t just an individual goal — it means he can bring those skills back to help his community.

“My hope is to provide a more positive impact on other people’s lives,” he said. “I want to go back to my community and build capacity to promote positive change. Hopefully, I will be a leader in my community and help guide its direction.”

Trujillo said he was “fortunate to have family who had expectations of school for me and my siblings.” Yet, he has had to overcome many challenges throughout his years away at college and now at graduate school.

“The struggle is in making trade-offs,” he said quietly. “To be away in school and missing my ability to make an impact on my community. I’m passing up time I could learn from the elders, learning how to be fluent in our language, our culture. It’s definitely a delicate dance. I’m going home this weekend to learn some ceremonies, but it’s expensive to travel there and I will miss some classes here.”

Still, Trujillo clearly understands the value his education holds.

“Working on an MBA has opened up a whole new avenue for me,” he said. “I want to improve the quality of life for underrepresented communities. I think my role, even though I’m not home and learning my language, is to be a role model and to take risks — even when far from home — to show that people can make themselves better to help those around them.”

Breaking the cycle

Currently a freshman in college, Peter Ryan Matt’s hometown is St. Ignatius, Montana, on the Flathead Indian Reservation. He is enrolled in the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate of the Lake Traverse Reservation, but also associates with his hometown tribe, the Confederated Salish Tribe.

A recipient of an AIEF scholarship, he has also participated in the PepsiCo RISE mentoring program.

“My experience with the mentoring program was nothing less



Peter Ryan Matt

than helpful," Matt said. "My adviser Michael provided me great advice and input whenever I needed it or just wanted someone to talk to; though he wasn't too pushy, which also was very good. I mean who wouldn't want his or her own personal adviser easily accessible by text or call anytime I needed him? Because I don't have any siblings that have graduated [from] college, it was nice to have someone I could turn to for advice and help that knew and had been through what I was going through, as well as the different circumstances we were able to bridge upon."

His love for education and learning began in late elementary school. "Seeing my community in poverty was what drove me to strive for good grades, college and, eventually, a job where I can help my peers and community," he said.

The biggest challenge Matt has faced in pursuing a postsecondary education is money. "My parents still have three younger kids and a grandson they are raising at home, so I took the challenge of financing college alone," he said. "Unfortunately, due to my father's income, I lost scholarships at the beginning of the year, but gradually because of scholarships like the AIEF and saving money from working, I was able to finance the first semester of college. This semester I was forced to move to a cheaper institution in hopes of saving money where

I can. I know nothing will weigh me down from pursuing my education, though."

He dreams of returning home and practicing Indian or environmental law. "Indian Country has fallen into a cycle of poverty since being first introduced to the New Age," he said. "I aim to provide an alternative, brighter path to the youth [to show them] that the cycle can be broken with hard work and determination."

Get up! RISE

Meagan Peeler, a member of the Choctaw Tribe and a finance manager at PepsiCo, founded the company's RISE employee resource group's Native American mentoring program in 2016 due to her own personal passion.

"As a first-generation college student myself, I remember what it was like — sitting in my dorm trying to figure out my classes and my major," she said. "My family, of course, was extremely supportive and gave me the best advice based on their limited knowledge and experience.

"Because of my own journey, I had a dream to launch this program at PepsiCo to help students navigate their way through undergrad and graduate school and pave the way for others coming after them just like I did for my family," Peeler said.

She said the PepsiCo RISE Native American Network is one of the company's many employee resource groups. "RISE's vision is to create and sustain meaningful relationships between PepsiCo and Native American tribes and communities," she said.

Although RISE is spelled with all caps, it isn't an acronym. The name originates from a story told by Cherokee Indian Choogie Kingfisher, whose grandmother endured the Trail of Tears in 1838, a forced march from federally seized tribal lands in North Carolina and Tennessee to Indian Territory — Oklahoma. Of the 16,000 Cherokee people who walked the trail in a year when the Southeast was parched in drought and the Midwest experienced one of its harshest winters ever recorded, only a few thousand survived. Kingfisher asked his grandmother how she got through such a terrible time when everything was so sad.

His grandmother replied: "For you see, as we walked over the trail, there were many songs that came forward. Songs that helped heal the soul ... songs of rejoicing, songs of pride and — most of all — songs of surviv-

al. You know these songs by heart because these are the songs that I taught you ..."

Kingfisher began to cry thinking about the Trail of Tears where his grandmother and so many others had walked. She said, "Grandson, why do you cry so — for this has been a long time? Grandson, you see that I am here. You see these old tired feet? I am still here. Grandson, you are part of me. You are part of the Cherokee People. Listen to the survival of the Cherokee People. Grandson, get up! RISE and sing this song with me."

Peeler said this story resonated with PepsiCo Frito-Lay Inc. operations manager Grace Panther when she created the employee resource group RISE in 2007.

In the RISE mentoring program with PWNA, each Native American student is paired with a PepsiCo employee, fostering a mentee/mentor relationship that focuses on professional development — interview tips, resume review, career advice — and consultation on navigating college and graduate school — study skills, help with homework and exploring extracurricular activities.

PepsiCo RISE is set to expand its mentoring program in 2018 to include participants of PWNA's 4D program in a group exclusively for Native American women. A key initiative of the group is to partner with "other like-minded businesses to expand this program and mentor all 250 American Indian Education Fund scholars, in addition to the 4D participants," Peeler said.

Year-round PWNA serves some 250,000 Native Americans living on 60 reservations in 12 states, many of whom are often impoverished and have limited access to grocery stores, health care and other essentials. The organization supports education, health, food and water needs, emergency services and animal welfare. Major support from corporations such as PepsiCo help make these programs possible.

Tapia believes strongly that education is one of the "most important cornerstones of self-sufficiency and quality of life and a crucial factor in addressing the long-term challenges many reservations are facing." He notes that more mentors are needed for Native American students and professionals. ■

To learn more about PWNA and AIEF, visit www.nativepartnership.org and www.aiefprogram.org or contact Mark Ford at mford@nativepartnership.org.