RICE ALUMNI
SOCIETY OF RICE INDIGENOUS ALUMNI
SPRING 2004 VOLUME 1, ISSUE 2


"5th Annual Rice Powwow" - 2003 Photo by Bob Rosenberg

WELCOME

Fellow Indigenous Rice Alumni and Friends,

Welcome to the second issue of the Society of Rice Indigenous Alumni newsletter. With Rice University's commencement fast approaching, this edition ponders the topic of Indigenous identity and education.

Native people have struggled with established western educational tenets from the beginning of European contact. However it does not seem to be so much with the subjects encountered in academia, but with the fundamental concepts of identity and belonging that emerge in conquering those tenets, balancing what is gained in terms of education and what is modified in terms of cultural integrity. Unlike generations of Indigenous students who endured "education for assimilation" policies, today it is easier for the Indigenous student to understand that the acquisition of knowledge should be an enrichment of who they are, not a replacement of who they are.


Dr. Gillis, Dr. Lisa Slappery, with Elizabeth Gillis
SRIA Pesentation of a Cherokee basket to Dr. Gillis at the January 2004 Houston Presidential Address.

Knowledge does not need to become a substitute, and yet for many Indigenous people who have left the village, reservation, and family to attend college, the conflict still emerges. Over time it becomes legitimate to ask the difficult questions. How does one go back to village or pueblo life with a Masters, Ph.D., or M.D. in hand? How does one continue to contribute and foster self-identity when, by the mere act of getting a western education, one has set him or herself apart from the majority of others like him or her?

Dr. Christine Lowery allows us a glimpse of her struggles with these questions in her narrative, Hearing the Messages: Integrating Pueblo Philosophy into Academic Life. This article, first published in the Journal of American Indian Education, follows the path of a Hopi/Laguna woman, steeped in a traditional upbringing, into the halls of academia. The path she outlines was so similar to my own and others, coming from a traditional upbringing to university and, for me, now to medical school, that I would like to share it. In addition, as mentioned in the first SRIA newsletter, we will profile a remarkable Rice Indigenous student: Powtawche Williams. Powtawche was raised on the Mississippi Choctaw reservation and is currently a Ph.D. candidate in Mechanical Engineering.

In closing, let me say that I believe that the integration of knowledge is an act of respect and reverence to all those who taught us and, ultimately, to ourselves. It is critical to remember that even though we may be far removed from the flowing spring of tribal culture, we are the representatives of that spring wherever we are. It will always be honorable to share the benefits of knowledge with others in the same way the old ones observed the stars that traveled the sky and the seasons that moved over their fields and through their lives. From their observations and the accumulation of their collective knowledge and wonder, identity and culture were born.

We, as Indigenous alumni, whether from North, Central or South America, continue to work and study to increase our wealth of knowledge beyond the borders of the tribe. Ultimately from our experiences the whole tribe will grow wiser and more observant to the wonders of the outside world. What will be critical, however, is understanding within ourselves and relaying to those we encounter that the wonder to be found in own worlds is just as remarkable.

Ken H. Masters '00
Grand Forks, South Dakota

SPRING FORUM

ARTICLE EXCERPT

HEARING THE MESSAGES:

INTEGRATING PUEBLO PHILOSOPHY INTO ACADEMIC LIFE

DR. CHRISTINE LOWERY

For the sake of readership dialogue, we will sometimes include information from guest contributors with information that is deemed of interest to this newsletter's readers. "Hearing the Messages: Integrating Pueblo Philosophy into Academic Life," by Dr. Christine Lowery, was first published in the Journal of American Indian Education. It follows the path of a Hopi/Laguna woman, steeped in a traditional upbringing, into the halls of academia. The opinions expressed are solely that of the authors and not of the Association of Rice Alumni or Rice University.

This essay was written near the end of my first year in academia and covers the academic journey through the Ph.D. program, the dissertation, the search for a place, right up to the merit review, "at best, a hostile act." The journey to the Ph.D. is not without confusion or pain and is made even more complex by the mixed messages that one draws from academia and the messages one carries in one's heart. Sometimes the academic din is so compelling, the ability to hear the messages that guide us as Indian people quickly fades. One way to ensure our stability is to share our stories, in hopes that the stories will help those who are coming behind us.

This story is about purpose. From a Hopi perspective it is spiritual purpose, because to be a good Hopi is to be prayerful in one's work. This is a story of how academic life is intertwined with my life as an American Indian woman. I am a Laguna-Hopi woman with shared belonging and place at Moencopi, Arizona, the home of my Hopi mother, and Paguate, New Mexico, the home of my 99-year-old Laguna grandfather. I am an Indian social worker. I am an Indian social work researcher. I am Pueblo. Early in my training as a Pueblo child, I was instructed to "Look around, see what you can do to help; don't be lazy." What drives this story is what I learned before I was four. I explain this in a contextual piece I call……

"I carry the seeds"

Long ago, before I was four—when my family, like so many other Laguna and Acoma families of the early 50s, moved to Barstow, California so my father could work for the railroad—I learned that everything had a spirit, that everything had a place, that everything was connected.

I was surrounded by old brown grandmas, women with lights in their eyes and the world in their wrinkled hands. I remember fresh corn and melons from the fields, dried deer meat hanging on the barbed wire fences, deer stew dinners with green Jello for dessert, red chili and fresh tortillas, peaches drying in the sun, the smell of warmth coming from the old wood stove, and hot oatmeal with canned milk. I "helped" my grandpa butcher sheep and chop wood, and helped my grandma rescue brown mountain bread from the hot outdoor ovens. I remember weeds with stickers, large black ants, little snakes, horned toads, New Mexico sun and New Mexico winds. I remember the excitement of preparations for welcoming the deer that the hunters would bring; the peacefulness of my grandpa praying for the world out by the woodpile at sunrise; the sound of the village crier giving instructions and calling out news; and nights so full of stars my grandma got tired of counting them for me.

I remember the sound of bells and turtle shells on the legs of the Katsina (dancers); the smell of pine boughs and the soft trance created by many feet in Pueblo moccasins, stepping to the murmur of the Laguna language made into songs and pulled out of drums by old brown men in bright shirts, bright scarves tied around their heads. It's the way the language feels, that low sounding comfort that evokes memories of the old road to Paguate village, way before the Anaconda uranium company gouged raw and gaping canyons in our land, coming down the hill in the pickup truck between my grandma and my grandpa.

And now, I only remember how I long to go home. And even knowing that it will never be quite the same, I carry the seeds of what it was, right here, in my spirit.

-Christine, a Pueblo (Hopi-Laguna) woman

Paying attention to the messages. There was never any doubt that I would return to school and study research. There are few American Indian social work educators, and fewer American Indian researchers in the field of social work. And there is much for Native People to contribute from our cultural perspectives, not just in the classroom, but to the social work research literature, and, I am learning, to the academic environment as well.

The matter of when to return to school was without doubt. The return to school would come at the end of a 12-year career as a social worker working on Indian reservations with Indian families. I wanted to be 40 when I returned to school. By then, I would be grounded in what I knew was culturally true for me, but open to learning what would be useful, and unafraid to speak or defend my position, whether it be cultural or academic. At this age, I would be in a time of power with enough strength to integrate and enough wisdom to teach.

One way to measure this strength is how well can I "hear the messages" in a setting so far from the source of my strength—my home, my relatives, and my work with Indian people on reservations. Hearing the messages means accurate interpretation of the signs—dreams, symbols, events, thoughts—evident in the world around me. Inherent in hearing the messages is the ability to incorporate these as part of oneself. Some would call this "finding one's path" or "being in the flow."

"Cultural loneliness," that initial separation from my source of strength, was painful. As my first quarter in the doctoral program progressed, I felt an emotional pain that had no obvious etiology other than the occasional incidents of racism that starkly indicated I was no longer at home. At the University of Washington, my advisor Tony Ishisaka, a Japanese man who recognized my spirit, identified this as "cultural loneliness."

Sometimes my spirit actually ached.
I missed, not just the support,
not just the opportunity of being surrounded
by other people like me,
but I missed the shared humor,
the sounds,
the feel of
the spirits of other Indian people.
As a foster care program coordinator,
I remember being embraced
by Pima (Akimel O'odham) foster parents,
and Pima children.
At the end of a foster parent training session,
I remember the sound of seeds in
a gourd rattle as it carried prayers skyward...
Blending with memories of the song-chants of the Kachina dancers
in the plaza in the upper village at Moencopi.
And laughing with Hopi women
about plays on words
in the Hopi language,
(at a time when I could better understand those phrases).
Blending further still, with the sound of the Acoma language
(which sounds so much like the Laguna language)
when my Acoma friend and Pueblo brother Simon Ortiz
told me Pueblo stories,
amid the brass and the ferns
in a Portland restaurant.
And brought tears to our eyes and
drew us back to the hillsides of New Mexico,
as we traveled the distance between his village and mine,
all in lonely memories
and deep, deep sighs.

"As American Indians in academia, we often must relocate from our places of origin".

Christine Lowery (Hopi-Laguna) studies addiction and recovery with American Indians. She teaches social work methods for graduates and undergraduates at the University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee. This article appeared in the Journal of American Indian Education. Volume 36, Number 2, Winter 1997. Reprinted with permission of the author.

Search for a dissertation topic. The second critical juncture in this academic path came when my own determination to research Indian child welfare—my last area of social work practice—met with small barriers: the long time frames for human subjects review at the Washington State Department of Human Services and the experiences of others who waited for approval for research in this system for up to nine months. The realities of research in a state agency coincided with the impact of crack cocaine and the growing numbers of addicted babies flooding the health care and child welfare systems. The latter stimulated my interest in addictions and women in 1990 when few articles on crack cocaine appeared in the professional journals. And when I came full circle in my thinking about how I could be of most use to my people, the impact of alcohol addiction on Indian child welfare systems could not be denied. The place of Indian women in this cycle was critical.

The advocacy for qualitative research methods in schools of social work appeared to be simultaneous with my interest in women and addictions. Looking back to the summer of 1992, my program of study drew on the addictions literature, including anthropological research on American Indians and alcohol. My program of independent study incorporated American Indian history and literature on women and balanced qualitative and quantitative research. The program of study coincided with the announcement of the first Magnuson Dissertation Awards in the health sciences at the University of Washington. Here was opportunity and a discipline that recognized addictions research. I would be one of six scholars that would be fully funded for the dissertation year. Can you recognize the messages?

The dissertation process. The qualitative analysis in the dissertation drew from the life histories of Indian women and produced beginning models of their decisions to quit drinking and a beginning model of Indian women's long-term recovery. From my perspective, the use of the life history to gather data for analysis was a natural choice. From a cultural perspective, the method is empowering—to be heard, to tell one's story, particularly in hopes that it will help someone else. These stories are stories of healing. These stories are stories of Indian women. As I review the recovery model developed from the dissertation research, I acknowledge the cultural power unleashed by the social construction of meaning inherent in qualitative methods.

Many stories with the power of cultural messages emerged from the interview process. I will mention two. The first is a story told by Tillie, a 53 year-old woman, with eight years of recovery. At a point of spiritual vulnerability, Tillie made a decision to quit using drugs. Sadly, she had been given a drug mixture of an unknown origin in an Indian medicine pipe. The reaction held her prisoner in a series of hallucinations that skirted reality in her attempts to dial the phone to get help. Part of these hallucinations that she called "dreams" featured her brother and his girlfriend, both of whom had died of alcoholism sometime before. They had come for her in his maroon car. "He looked so good," Tillie remembered. The girlfriend leaned forward in the front seat and offered Tillie entry to the back seat of the car. "Come with us," they coaxed.

(The full article can be accessed at: Journal of American Indian Education: http://jaie.asu.edu/v36/V36S2hea.htm)

RICE STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

Powtawche N. Williams, Mississippi Choctaw
B.S. Mechanical Engineering, Stanford University, 1997
M.S. Mechanical Engineering, Rice University, 2001
Ph.D. Candidate Mechanical Engineering, Rice University

I arrived at Rice from Stanford University with the experience and support of a strong Native American community environment. As a former undergraduate of Stanford, I looked forward to a similar support unit that I valued and cherished. My interests, which included my graduate study research topic in mechanical engineering and aero-astronautics, easily found a home on Rice's campus. I appreciated the fact that everything was accessible, from playing the cello with the Rice Campanile Orchestra to jogging with friends around the campus's outer-loop.

During my first year at Rice, I began searching for students with similar backgrounds, especially from the Native American culture. I was born in New Orleans and lived on the Choctaw Indian Reservation in Philadelphia, Mississippi for a few years of my childhood. While growing up, I developed an affinity for frybread, powwows, and joking about "rez" life. Eventually, I gravitated toward others who shared the same interests. I met my Rice counterparts during my first meeting with the Rice Native American Student Association (RNASA). Ken Masters (Sid Rich, Cherokee) and Stephen Prillman (Will Rice, Salish/Kootenai) were student leaders who introduced me to RNASA and their vision for Native American Students at Rice.

Although the enrollment of Native Americans on Rice's campus is smaller than other universities, I found the pride, interests, and support seems to be the same. Through RNASA, I learned about other indigenous cultures and Houston Indian community members through events such as informal study breaks, speaker engagements, and the annual RNASA powwow. I relished the opportunity in knowing the extended RNASA family, which I may not have done if the student group was larger.

If I had a wish for the future of the Native American community at Rice, it would be for RNASA to become part of a full-fledge admission and retention organization (or program center) for Native Americans who attend Rice. I've also communicated with several Native American alumni who expressed similar views and feel that the existence of an organization like RNASA is vital for Native Americans attending Rice. There's a misconception that Rice's environment is adverse to the recruitment of Native American students. Instead, I feel that there can be great potential for growth and support as long as there is someone (other than students) who is willing to lead and carry on the vision.

As for my future, I'm planning to complete my engineering program within the next year and look forward to contributing to society as a productive citizen. However, no matter where I end up, I hope to stay in touch with the Rice Native American student community and contribute my support whenever possible. Moreover, I would like for future generations of Rice Native American students to have the satisfaction of participating in an organization that fosters academic success and leadership while maintaining cultural traditions.

"Rice Powwow" - photo by Jeff Fitlow

NATIONAL EVENTS

The Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) will have its grand opening week on the National Mall in Washington D.C. September 21-26, 2004.

The museum's website is www.AmericanIndian.si.edu.

Colophon:

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