

EDUCATION

EDUCATION AS A SOCIAL DETERMINANT OF HEALTH: INCREASING HEALTH AND OPPORTUNITY THROUGH EDUCATION

Education is a social determinant of health and studies have shown a relationship between education and increased wellness. According to the Post-Secondary National Policy Institute (PNPI), Native American students make up less than 1% of undergraduate and graduate students in the United States. Similarly, according to PNPI, 24% of Native Americans age 18-24 are enrolled in college compared to 41% of the U.S population. For some Native American community members, getting a college degree has changed their life and their health.



**IN THIS STORY,
TILTON DENNISON SHARES IN
HIS OWN WORDS HIS JOURNEY
TO COLLEGE AND HOW HIS
RELATIONSHIPS AND CULTURE
HELPED MAKE HIM A
SUCCESSFUL COLLEGE
GRADUATE.**

TILTON

DEFYING THE STEREOTYPES BY CARING FOR OTHERS

MY STORY

My education experience seemed to always prove pre-conceived notions of pathways to success wrong – in high school I knew what I wanted to do – but I did not always do the work. I loved the social dynamics- I was always the person who listened to people. On the Navajo reservation we all dealt with the same things; drug abuse, domestic violence, single parents working long hours and often absent from home. There was lots of depression, anxiety, and even suicide.

I learned early on that I was not alone in my experiences – that others could understand me and I could understand them. When my friends talked to me – I did not want to be a victim but an ear for others – maybe that way I could make a change. I was in a lot of sports – but as I listened to others- I also sought out other roles like in Student Government – Class Vice President and President – and I worked to make the school environment comfortable and fun for my classmates. I wanted to make others smile.

I go to ceremonies a lot- peyote ceremonies- I would go with my Dad. I come from a family that is an activist for peyote and the Native American church. So, I went to ceremonies- and I learned that native medicine men used the power of rhetoric to help others- I learned the power of words to impact the lives of others. Not only did they speak in Navajo- they also translated traditional concepts into English so everyone could understand.



TILTON

WHAT I HAVE LEARNED



I learned that some people believe you do not have to be “educated” to help others- I had family members that believed that money does not necessarily bring happiness- my grandparents valued our culture over money. But I also learned that being educated could help me to help others. I had a relationship with a medicine man and community counselor. He helped community members through difficult times- he did not just focus on Western perspectives, but he would do ceremonies, songs and prayers to help others. He passed away from Suicide- followed by three young community members. This was a dark time- I would look at my family and friends and I wondered if I would see them again.

My wife and I have been together since high school. She was always the one who valued education- and she encouraged me to do well and continue my education. My senior year, we found out she was pregnant. My relatives taught me that pregnancy and intimacy was sacred- so we had to grow up fast. I saw my friends who did not have a Mom or a Dad and we decided that we would be there for our child. My wife was her high school’s valedictorian, and she gave her graduation speech while five months pregnant. My wife’s family had high expectations for her- she always excelled at school- and i promised myself that she would go to college. We were teen parents and knew the odds were against us- but I think my relationship with others- and the things that I learned and gained from helping others- gave me strength to continue toward our goals of continuing our education.

TILTON

THE POWER OF CULTURE AT TRIBAL COLLEGES

DINE COLLEGE

Dine College, the Navajo Tribal college, was just right there- close to my community after high school. My wife wanted to go to college- and convinced me to look and start thinking about college. When we visited the college- and saw the housing and a chance to study and be on our own- we applied and were accepted. We got scholarships- which helped us focus on school- and we realized that we could continue our education and get support while completing our degrees. We also do art- beading and decorating feathers- to supplement our income and continued to do this throughout our education.

My wife encouraged me to attend Dine College and to finish my degree. At Dine College- everything is Navajo- everything is taught according to Navajo philosophy, Navajo language, and Navajo beliefs. The things that I had experienced in ceremonies throughout my life were right there in the classroom. I learned from Navajo educators- who were talking about things I experienced all over the Navajo nation during ceremonies.



PEER MENTOR

MY JUNIOR YEAR

During my junior year- I got a job as a peer mentor. This job was competitive – but it seemed right for me as we needed the money and it was about helping others. When I got this job- I realized that I had potential- that I could make something of myself and help others. I worked my way up to a program coordinator. Dine College nurtured me- as a tribal institution with tribal knowledge embedded in the education. I say that I am fortunate- and my wife inspired a lot of my success. Today I would not change my life- even though we were teen parents and took a path that many think leads to problems or barriers- we persisted and now feel successful. It was my relationships, my culture, and my desire to help others that led to my success. When I counsel students, I remind them to look at the things in their lives that make them strong and to use those things to get move forward and to grow. Education has meant opportunity for me and my family and I want that for other Native American students too.



THE POWER OF MENTORSHIP