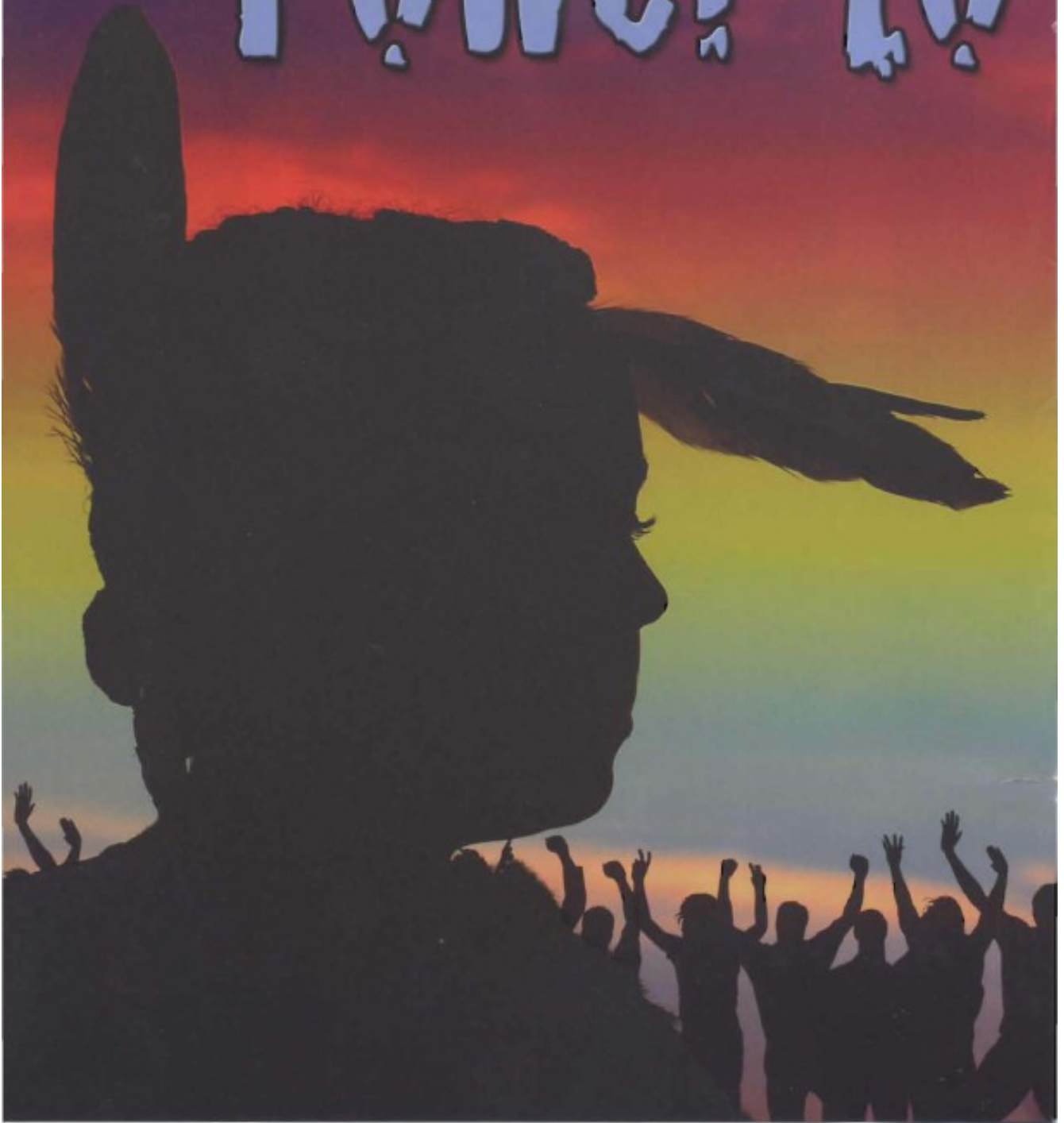


POWER to



# the people

## *Tribal activists transform communities*

*By Patty Talabongva*

*When everyone told them it couldn't be done,* Joe McDonald, Ed.D., remembers how firmly tribal leaders stuck to their guns and helped draft federal legislation to fund the tribal college system.

When her own husband questioned her efforts to get a college degree, Alvena Oldman ignored his cutting remarks and kept on taking classes.

When people try to treat Indian students as victims and don't set high standards for them, Cheryl Crazy Bull objects and insists that they can achieve, regardless of their age or circumstances.

And when one state university kicked him out for bad grades, Manley Begay, Jr., went back to his tribal college to seriously start his educational career. It led to a doctorate degree and to him being introduced these days as one of the most successful graduates of Navajo Community College (now known as Diné College).

Each of these people exemplifies activism, defined in the dictionary as "the doctrine or practice of vigorous action or involvement as a means of achieving political or other goals." Through education, these four have transformed themselves and strive to transform their communities.

When the first tribal colleges were created back in the late 1960s and '70s, they represented the fruition of a political

goal but, equally important, a cultural goal. Ever since, Indian activism has been thriving at all of the tribal colleges. From the administrators to the students there are hundreds of stories of how people have taken "vigorous action as a means of achieving a goal."

### **'Sometimes you have to Make Noise'**

"Sometimes you can do it quietly, and sometimes you have to make a little noise," says McDonald, chuckling just a little bit. McDonald, 77, is enrolled with the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribe.

His work for the tribal colleges began more than 35 years ago when he joined other tribal educators in Washington, DC, to seek federal legislation for tribal colleges. He remembers stick pins in a map of the western

United States to show the various mainstream colleges and universities in relationship to tribal lands. The picture showed the huge void of higher education facilities near reservations. That was the argument they took to Congress to start the ball rolling.

The tribal college advocates had to wade through the rapids of naysayers. They had to get a bill through the U.S. Senate, and then "they said the House would never pass it," he continues. "They said President Carter would never sign it,"

---

*"We'd argue and fight and then carry on and not carry any grudges."*

---

because Carter was so fiscally conservative.

And tribal leaders had to make their own compromises amongst themselves. Congress had already passed legislation establishing Navajo Community College. After talking it over, tribal leaders took that bill and created two sections. Title 2 deals only with Navajo. Title 1 covers all the other tribal colleges.

"It was a compromise on Navajo's part to change the title and include us," says McDonald. "We get funded by how many students we have, whereas Diné gets a block grant." He says this illustrates why people should know their history. What may seem unfair at first glance is actually generosity on the part of the Navajo Nation.

After they finally got their bill they faced another hurdle. "They said we'd never get an appropriation," McDonald says. Even the folks from the Bureau of Indian Affairs testified against the bill, but he cuts them some slack, acknowledging that President Jimmy Carter didn't want any new programs. Still, tribal leaders prevailed. The Tribally Controlled Community Colleges Assistance Act of 1978 passed and received appropriations.

McDonald says it came about partly because folks were willing to compromise. The American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC) board is made up of presidents of all the tribal colleges. "You just look at the bigger picture. That's the wonderful thing about the AIHEC board: they're willing to do that. We'd argue and fight and then carry on and not carry any grudges."

McDonald took what he learned working with those other tribal leaders back to his own tribe. "I was on the tribal council at the same time, and it was really a good lesson for me to see how people could work together," he recalls. "You get things done when you do that."

The founding president of Salish Kootenai College (SKC, Pablo, MT), McDonald spent 33 years as an activist on behalf of SKC and the other tribal colleges before he retired in June 2010.

### Defying the Skeptics

"I never really attended any college," says Alvena Oldman. While not a conventional student, Oldman, in fact, attended many colleges, scraping her credits together, one semester at a time, while raising a family and working. She took classes at Haskell Indian Nations University (Lawrence, KS), Casper College (Casper, WY), Wind River Tribal College (Ethete,



*WORKING BOTH SIDES.* Democratic Presidential contender Hillary Clinton spoke at Salish Kootenai College during her primary campaign in 2008. Joe McDonald worked closely with both Republicans and Democrats on behalf of the tribal colleges and experienced flak when he endorsed Republican U.S. Sen. Conrad Burns, a long-time supporter of the tribal colleges, in his unsuccessful attempt to retain the seat in 2006.

WY), and she even suffered through a hot Arizona summer taking classes at Arizona State University (Tempe, AZ).

"I had to work so I just took classes whenever there was an opportunity," she says, including one correspondence course. Since there was no Internet then, she received her books and lessons through old-fashioned snail mail. When she finished her work, she'd mail it back.

After literally decades of taking courses here and there, she went to a counselor at Wind River Tribal College and found she had enough credits for an associate degree. In spring of 2009, Alvena Oldman, 71, marched across the stage to receive her Associate of Arts Degree in Indian Studies and Arapahoe Language.

She faced her share of skeptics along the way. "Some people would say, 'You're kinda old for this.' Or, 'What good is it going to do you?' I said, 'I'm doing it for myself. I want to see this piece of paper one day!' and I did!" Among her critics was her husband of 36 years, who told her, "Oh well, you'll never amount to anything."

---

*"I did it. My folks didn't have the money, but I really tried to get somewhere."*

---



*NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENT? When Alvena Oldman graduated from Wind River Tribal College in 2009, she joined the ranks of many tribal college graduates who completed their degrees late in life. While not the "traditional" age of a college student, Oldman and other such students often practice their tribal traditions and speak their Native language. Photo courtesy of the Oldman family*

His words only made her strive harder. She's sad that he wasn't there to see her graduate; he passed away in 1998. But in the audience to witness her life-long goal were her children, grandchildren, and a few great grandchildren. Her degree is framed and hanging on the wall.

She wants to instill her passion for education into her students, her family, and other young people on the reservation. As the director and a teacher at the *Hinonó'eitino'osuu* (Arapahoe Language Immersion School) on the Wind River Reservation, she's doing her part to keep the Arapahoe language alive. A fluent speaker, she can also read and write in Arapahoe. She's now teaching 16 students, all three to five years old, at the school, which is funded by the Arapahoe Tribe.

When students tell her they're too old to go to school or they don't want to do it, she always tells them, "I did it. My folks didn't have the money, but I really tried to get somewhere."

She looks at her kids who work at the tribal casino and sees a bigger picture for their future. As for herself, Oldman, who turned 72 in January, is now contemplating a bachelor's degree.

#### **Don't Leave your Culture at Home**

Cheryl Crazy Bull has been involved in tribally controlled education since 1981 soon after the first six tribal colleges were created. An enrolled member of the Sicangu Band of the Lakota Nation, she worked at Sinte Gleska University on her

home reservation (Rosebud, SD) for 14 years, including several years as vice president and a dean. Subsequently, she was the chief educational officer for a tribally chartered school there.

Then about eight years ago she left South Dakota to become the president of Northwest Indian College (NWIC, Bellingham, WA). During her tenure at NWIC, she served as president of the AIHEC board for two years. In 2010, Seattle University awarded her an honorary doctorate degree in recognition of her work enhancing access to higher education.

Today at 55, she says she is happy to play a role in influencing students to embrace their heritage. She likes the fact that tribal college students don't have to leave their culture at home. "They can have their traditional way of living in a contemporary environment," she says. "You can have your kinship and your spiritual practices; you can have all of that in today's society." That comingling of Western education and traditional values is the foundation of the tribal college system.

"It was an act of social and transformative change," she says. "People really put themselves out there for a movement; it's really about making the community better and making people's lives better."

She hopes tribal colleges never lower their standards. "I hope that we don't offer a less rigorous experience. I think our people have many challenges around our socio-economic conditions." Nevertheless, she believes college presidents and faculty must keep the expectations high. "Obviously our students are capable of reaching higher standards," she reasons.

Crazy Bull cringes at the notion that Native people are victims. "Institutions may present that," she says, even allies of tribal colleges with good intentions. "They look at our historical context and define us."

---

*"Sometimes, because of life's circumstances, students are given an excuse for not being in class, for not finishing what's expected of them."*

---

But she says, "When I think about what I've observed over the years, I have high expectations regardless of your age or family circumstances."

"Sometimes, because of life's circumstances, students are given an excuse for not being in class, for not finishing what's expected of them. "I think it's a learned behavior. We're so exposed to that, 'Oh you've been victimized,' and that becomes how we participate and respond." That's not the way she thinks. Her message is simple: "Do your work! Do what's expected of you! Give 100%."

#### 'You can't Say No to Grandma'

Manley Begay, Jr. didn't give 100% when he first entered college. "I didn't see what higher education had to offer," he recalls. "I'm a college dropout!" he reveals. In the early '70s he enrolled at Northern Arizona University and lasted only one semester. "Essentially I flunked out." During those turbulent times, Begay would rather be out protesting the treatment of farm workers with legendary activist Cesar Chavez than attending classes.

But when he went back to the reservation, reality hit. "Gosh, what am I going to do now?" he recalls thinking. His mother and grandmother encouraged the dejected young scholar to enroll in the young Navajo Community College. He calls it "one of the best decisions I ever made" and adds, "Women are always right!"

At the tribal college in Arizona he found the strong cultural environment Crazy Bull described and the type of educational system McDonald fought for. "The elders taught Navajo history, culture, arts, Navajo ways of thinking about the world, religion, ceremonies," he recalls. "You could not find this mixture in any other part of the world. (They) went right alongside math, history, and science." For him the experience fit with the turbulent times, mixing education along with the feeling of cultural pride sweeping the nation. In that environment he shined.

Begay received encouragement, caring, and understanding from his instructors, which he responded to by working hard. "You just can't say no to Grandma and Grandpa; the only thing you could do was strive. I was allowed to thrive."

He found cultural strength that helped him understand his place in the world. That lesson was tested once he graduated and left his reservation cocoon to earn more degrees at the



*CEDAR BLESSINGS. NWIC President Cheryl Crazy Bull, wearing a traditional Lummi cedar hat, presents a posthumous diploma for the late Earl Jones. From left are Karen Scott, and Willie Jones, Sr. Jones was honored for his work with the Lummi Indian School of Aquaculture, the precursor of NWIC. Photo by Maria Orloff*

University of Arizona, Brigham Young University, and finally Harvard. The environment at Harvard was so foreign it may as well have been on Jupiter.

"You get a mixture of students from all over the world, and you're sort of thrown into the mix. And if you don't know who you are as a Native person, you'll get lost in other cultures and other ways of thinking about the world."

Begay didn't get lost. Instead he earned a bachelor of arts, master's in education, and then a doctorate in education in 1997. He was the first Navajo to graduate from Harvard with a doctorate. He points to Diné College as the root of his success.

Some of his classmates from the tribal college became successful teachers, government officials, artists, medicine

---

*"It's neither secure nor absolute because there's a constant threat to sovereignty."*

---



*INTERNATIONAL ACTIVIST. Manley Begay, Jr., has been addressing indigenous nation leaders for many years as faculty chair of the Native Nations Institute. He helps them rethink their political and economic structures and how to best serve their traditional ways of life. Photo courtesy of NNI*

people, and academics. "Good grandmas and good grandpas also came out as well!" he adds.

Today Begay helps shape the lives and careers of hundreds of Native students as a professor and social scientist in the American Indian Studies program at the University of Arizona. He also plays an important role on the international stage, helping indigenous nations around the world to rethink their political and economic structures. He is the faculty chair of the Native Nations Institute for Leadership, Management, and Policy in the Udall Center for Studies in Public Policy. In this position, he helps indigenous nations establish political systems that best serve their traditional ways of life.

#### **'Lie Down in Front of Bulldozers'**

Looking to the future each person sees a continuing need for people to become actively involved. Crazy Bull thinks the biggest challenge will be retaining the tribal college identity. "There's pressure on us to look and act like mainstream institutions. But we really think of education as a more whole-person approach."

Oldman says the tribe's efforts to teach the Arapahoe language need more back-up and reinforcement. "It's real frustrating now; there's no Arapahoe language spoken in most homes. The only place most kids hear it is in school. They pick it up and learn it here, but it's not reinforced anywhere, even in elementary school. They start losing it again." She says the tribal council is trying to address this issue.

And remember that "noise" McDonald spoke of? Well, he'd like to hear more noise coming from students. "I think our students today are a little quieter than in the past. I know they do support, testify, write letters. But they don't seem to want to lie down in front of the bulldozer like they used to." He's not sure why. He doesn't want to teach students to riot, but he would like to see more action.

"I hope we continue to teach all sides of an issue and continue to teach people to analyze things and stand up for what's right – what's going to help the people and what's going to help our Mother Earth." The former coach says, "She can only take so much slam dunking. How much are we going to stand for that?"

Begay for many years has been the co-director of the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development. So, naturally he focuses upon financial self-sufficiency when he thinks about the future of the tribal colleges and universities. "My hope is that these institutions will become financially stable, with endowments to allow them to be very creative in how they develop their curriculum, how they respond to the needs of Native societies and communities."

He recalls the non-Indians who were surprised and shocked that Indians wanted to build and run their own institutions of higher education. "Are you really serious about this? You're really going to run your own higher education establishment? Can Indians really do this?" he mocks the early skeptics.

"It's been proven, yes we can! And we can do it on our own terms." But Begay cautions, "It's neither secure nor absolute because there's a constant threat to sovereignty. There's a constant threat (when) others hold the purse strings to many of these institutions." ■

*Patty Talabongva is a freelance journalist and covers stories for both print and broadcast including Native Peoples Magazine and CBS News.*