

Diné College speaker: ‘...get back to yesteryear’

Written by By Bernie Dotson For the Sun
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TSAILE, Ariz. — Descendants of Navajos in the Four Corners are continuing the battle to keep their sovereignty alive — a daunting task that at times seems fruitless.

What some see as progress, others see as encroachment as the outside world brings changes to a culture deemed sacred a long time ago. There are those who fear that the unique Navajo culture and heritage could be overrun and lost.

That was the thesis of a 90-minute lecture March 6 by Manley Begay Jr., Ph.D., a tenured professor at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff whose speech was entitled, “Cultural Resources: Traditional Navajo Thinking on Sovereignty.”

Begay holds advanced degrees from Harvard University in Massachusetts and grew up in Wheatfields and Tuba City, Ariz., on the Navajo Nation Indian Reservation. A 1975 graduate of Navajo Community College (now Diné College), Begay speaks fluent Navajo and graduated from Tuba City High School.

“Were living in an era of tremendous self-determination,” Begay said. “More so than what we’d like to acknowledge. We have to get back to yesteryear. There are more powers of sovereignty at our disposal right now.”

Begay told the several dozen members of the audience gathered that there exists a neo-sovereignty among the Navajo people and such a thing is evident within the judicial branch of tribal government.

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In a practical sense, he said Diné College — then and now — “represents traditional Navajo thought,” and that the College is steeped in Navajo tradition, suggesting identity, or “Navajoism,” is an indispensable element that students take with them upon graduation. That is what makes Diné College distinct, he stressed, and that is part and parcel of what makes Diné College graduates successful.

“You have something special here,” Begay said, noting Diné College’s myriad of course offerings in Navajo language and history. “It was (Diné College) that started me on my journey. It will forever be a very special place.”

Begay said the Navajo people have gone through Spanish and Mexican colonialism and have come out with a strong sense of identity. He said current laws are supposed to help, but there is a certain amount of hozho (harmony and balance) that is absent in Navajo culture.

Initially, Begay flunked out of NAU when he started there as an undergraduate years ago, but got back on track and went on to graduate from Brigham Young University, the University of Arizona and Harvard.

The March 6 event was the third in the College’s speaker series highlighting the 50th anniversary of Diné College. Tommy Lewis, Ed.D., a former president at Diné College and former Arizona state senator Jack Jackson, Sr., were the first two speakers of the series.

“He is an amazing person,” Miranda Haskie, Ed.D., a sociology professor at Diné College and the organizer of the speaker series, said of Begay. “His message was well-received.”

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