

UNM-Gallup student named Udall Scholar

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The University of New Mexico-Gallup recently announced that Cobin Willie, a level 2 nursing student, has been awarded the prestigious Udall Scholarship. Willie is the first UNM-Gallup student to have received this designation and is currently the only recipient from New Mexico for this academic year.

Willie, a member of the Navajo Nation from To'hajiilee, was selected from among 437 applicants representing 209 higher education institutions.

The scholarship program, sponsored by the Udall Foundation, pays tribute to Morris Udall and Stewart Udall who spent their careers working on initiatives that impacted Native American self-governance, healthcare and environmental issues.

The application was both time and writing intensive, but Willie said he found it to be personally beneficial.

"I was initially intimidated by such heavy requirements," he said. "The standards were very high but the blessing of the process was that it made me think about priorities and career goals. I initially was going into community paramedics but as a result of going through the application process I felt I was guided towards nursing and art therapy."

U.S. Sen. Tom Udall, D-N.M., represented his family at the Udall Scholarship orientation, which took place in Tucson, Ariz., and during which he gave a lecture to the scholars on the importance of arts in communities.

"I was so impressed with what the senator had to say, I recorded his speech," Willie said. "For the talent show part of the orientation, I played the intro of Senator Udall's speech then started playing a song I composed over the lecture. People were crying and seemed moved by my performance and many asked me to re-record it and email it to them."

Willie said he was proud of his school and felt comfortable with the size of the campus and the support he is receiving.

"I don't feel like this would have happened to me anywhere else," he said. "I loved representing a small school. As a student of UNM-Gallup, I was positioned right next to the student from Duke University. It was such a sense of pride and achievement for me."

Although art and music play a pivotal role in Willie's life, when he came to UNM-Gallup he said he had never had any formal training in either.

"I went to the Art Student Collective just for free pizza," Willie said. "I thought you needed to be an art student. I showed Ms. Wilson (adjunct instructor Kristi Wilson) some of the masks I made and she asked where I had gotten my training. I told her I'd never had any training."

Lofty life goals and a passion for making a difference in the world continue pushing this student forward in all aspects of his life.

“I want to finish my ADN (associate degree in nursing) and BSN (bachelor’s degree in nursing) here in Gallup and then move to the main campus in Albuquerque to get a doctorate in nursing psychology,” Will said.

Willie, already an emergency medical technician, is also just a few credit hours away from receiving an associate degree in emergency medical services, which is a credential he also intends to complete.

Willie said he plans to pursue a career in art therapy in order to remove the stigma surrounding mental illness, especially within Native American populations.

“Art can allow people to gather their thoughts and get mentally better,” he said.

He said he wants to help people develop the habit of turning to art exercises to deal with PTSD, anxiety or depression.

“Traditional therapy doesn’t always connect with Native American culture and can be difficult to obtain in rural areas,” Willie said. “Getting a doctorate in nursing will allow me to help design treatment plans and improve quality of life for patients.”

Dr. James Malm, UNM-Gallup chief executive officer, extended congratulations to Willie.

“We are so proud of Cobin and his accomplishments,” he said. “He is a great success story and illustrates many of the reasons students thrive at UNM-Gallup. We will continue cheering him on as he achieves his educational and professional goals.”

For more information about the Udall Foundation visit: www.udall.gov/AboutUs/AboutUs.aspx

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