

Veteran weaves UNM into his life

Written by gallupsun

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A first-year student at The University of New Mexico-Gallup found a way to express his creativity and connect to his culture while also commemorating the start of his higher education journey.

Darrel Watchman, who is pursuing an associate degree in human services with a concentration in family studies, created a red rug with a white UNM logo in the center alongside two butterfly designs for a project in his Navajo Weaving class.

“I wanted to weave UNM into the rug because, in a sense, I wanted to weave UNM into my life,” he said. “It becomes a part of me, and I become a part of it. ... This is a reminder for me: ‘This is what you asked for. This is what you and your wife talked about. Don’t go giving up.’”

Watchman is originally from Ganado, Arizona, and currently lives with his wife, Telena, in Tsayatoh, New Mexico, a chapter of the Navajo Nation just outside of Gallup. He said Telena ultimately encouraged him, now at 39 years old, to go back to school to further his education.

But life had other plans for Watchman before he got to UNM-Gallup.

"IT MAKES ME WANT TO KEEP GOING"

Watchman was born into the Water's Edge Clan, born for the Black Streak Wood People Clan. His maternal grandfather's clan is Coyote Pass and his paternal grandfather's clan is Red Running into the Water.

He graduated from high school in Chinle, Arizona, in 2002. He then enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps and served five years, doing two tours in Iraq as an aviation operations specialist during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

After being discharged, he applied for college, but never enrolled. Instead, he found work and did other things, such as beadwork.

Watchman and his wife recently moved back to the Gallup area from Albuquerque, and he finally decided, with Telena's support, to enroll at UNM-Gallup in the summer of 2023.

His decision to become a Lobo was inspired by the fact that Telena herself first came to UNM-Gallup to pursue her nursing degree before completing her bachelor's at the UNM main campus in Albuquerque. Watchman's childhood best friend also graduated from UNM with a bachelor's degree.

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Watchman was also inspired by the stories of Dr. Chenoa Bah Stilwell-Jensen, a part-time instructor at UNM in Albuquerque, and Dr. Carolene Whitman, an adjunct at UNM-Gallup, both of whom obtained their doctorates while maintaining a strong hold of their cultural identity.

“All these people who pursued education and who were connected to UNM, it was inspiring to me to see the people I look up to,” he said. “It makes me want to keep going.”

'THESE THINGS HAVE A LIFE OF THEIR OWN'

Watchman said he chose the Navajo Weaving class as an elective at UNM-Gallup because his wife's grandmother weaves and does amazing work. He also witnessed his late paternal grandmother sitting at a big loom and weaving away when he was young.

“I always remembered that,” he said. “When I walk around the shops and see beautiful rugs, man, I wonder how long it took them and wonder what was going through their head when they did that. I wanted to learn on my own. I wanted to learn for myself.”

He initially thought it would be a breeze, but he quickly learned how much work and patience goes into carding, spinning and cleaning the wool as well as the warping process.

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Watchman said he struggled with his first project, weaving up and down, trying different things and changing his mind several times. It wasn't until he learned how to stop fighting against the work that the final design came to him.

"These things have a life of their own," he said. "They're here. No matter what I was taught when I first started on my artistic journey — doing beadwork and all that — this was here long before us. This is a gift from the Holy People. What we have and what we do is not on our own. It's put here for us to take care of. Although my hands put it together, it's not my doing. That's the way I see it."

'I'M LIVING MY DREAM'

As a non-traditional student, Watchman said he feels like an "old man" sharing classes with high school students who are dual-enrolled at UNM-Gallup.

However, his experience at the branch campus has been great so far, even when the going

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gets tough.

For example, Watchman said his current math class has been challenging, but his wife reminds him that he's doing well and that he needs to keep his head up and move forward even though he's not earning the grade he hoped for.

"She threw my words back at me," he joked. "She told me whether I take a big step or little step, it doesn't matter as long as it's in the right direction."

Watchman believes that if you believe in something strong enough, want it bad enough and pray enough, you can achieve it. He's applying that positive attitude toward his education, and he hopes to help others find that positivity through his future career.

He wants to become a social worker to help his fellow veterans or victims of domestic violence to overcome their trauma and to find their voices. He wants to help people move forward with what they've experienced. He wants to give them strength to find a path where they're no longer in any danger.

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That desire comes from a personal place. Watchman said he endured abuse himself when he was growing up. When people ask him what his dream is, he tells them that he's exactly where he wants to be.

"My dream was to get out of the home I was raised in and move on and live a life without worrying about being abused or yelled at," he said. "I wanted to be in a home filled with love. That was my dream. So, I'm living my dream. I'm in a home filled with love and don't have to worry about anything else."

'ALLOW YOURSELF TO BECOME THE PERSON YOU ARE'

Watchman also witnessed first-hand the destruction of alcoholism. Within a seven-year timeframe, his father, his oldest brother and his second oldest brother all died to alcohol-related causes.

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Watchman said he chose to pursue social work so he could try to understand their mindsets and what they were going through, so he can help others in similar situations.

In particular, he wants to help people move forward, not necessarily to move on.

“You don’t really move on,” he said. “The trauma from my childhood, I still carry with me. Those experiences you have, good or bad, especially the bad ones, you can let them consume you and fill you up with bitterness and anger and it’ll take you down. Or you can sit and reflect on it and try to understand it and move forward with it. I think in that way, you become a better, stronger person and you’re better able to talk to people.”

He didn’t reach that way of positive thinking overnight though. He acknowledged that he himself used to carry his anger, but his wife had a big hand in helping him become who he is today and realizing his educational goals.

When he graduates from UNM-Gallup, Watchman plans to earn a bachelor’s degree and

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pursue his master's, but one step at a time.

As he continues to work on figuring out his path as a first-generation college student, the services at UNM-Gallup have helped him a lot so far, particularly the tutoring from TRIO Student Support Services and the Center for Academic Learning.

"It's never too late, especially for a person like me," he said. "I've been out of school for so long, I found it intimidating going back. There's all these younger kids, and they're getting a jump on life. Here I am at 39 years old walking into school like, 'Who am I? What can I do? What do I know?' You can't give up on yourself. A lot of people talk themselves out of the journey before they even start. Let go of that self-doubt and that fear. Allow yourself to become the person you are."

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