

NTU grad reflects on obtaining M.A. in Diné Culture, Language and Leadership

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Navajo Technical University conferred 117 degrees and certificates on Dec. 9 at the university's commencement ceremony, including a master's of arts degree in Diné Culture, Language and Leadership when Aurelia Yazzie of Sheep Springs graduated.

Yazzie became the second student ever to earn the degree from NTU after Perry James of Continental Divide earned one in May 2016. Yazzie said she was appreciative of the program and enjoyed the approach it took in blending western education with traditional Navajo values and thought.

"The program goes in depth about what it really means to uphold traditional values and to learn and teach from that perspective," Yazzie said.

Yazzie said her clans are Bit'ahnii and Tsi'naajinii. "A lot of information I learned was so overwhelming, especially from the people who knew these things and have lived through it. It was just a wealth of information that I never knew and it caused me to look at my life differently and the way I teach."

Yazzie worked 20 years in the education field prior to enrolling at NTU, having spent 17 years at To'haalí Community School in Newcomb, and another two years at Ch'ooshgai Community

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School in Tohatchi. She also worked five years teaching at various satellite sites for Diné College, where she earned her associate of arts degree in Diné Studies before obtaining an undergraduate degree in bilingual education from Fort Lewis College, Durango, Colo.

As an educator, Yazzie said she appreciated the fluidity of NTU's master's program and its appeal to people of all backgrounds and professions. That's really what education is about, she alluded.

"The master's program I was in could be looked at from every angle," Yazzie said. Yazzie wrote her thesis on Diné Bi Beehas'aanii Bits Silei (Parenting Skills Utilizing Navajo Perspective)."

"From my stance it was from an educational and parenting perspective, whereas another student may see it from an environmental point of view or another student might see it from the point of view of things that are going on within the community. It was a lot of good information."

Prior to enrolling at NTU, Yazzie explored several other programs for an advanced degree, but each program that she came across was focused solely on curriculum, which Yazzie said she felt she pretty much knew after 20 years of teaching. And the cost of attending a larger institution weighed heavily on her mind.

"The cost of attending Western University or UNM was crazy, sometimes between \$300 and \$400 per credit hour," Yazzie said. "NTU wasn't too expensive, at the same time, I was really interested in making a contribution to the Navajo Nation with what I know."

Yazzie continued, "Take Navajo children: I need to know where they're coming from and what their values are in order to understand what these kids go through – having to function in Western society and juggle Navajo traditions."

Yazzie said she plans to keep working at Cho'ooshgai School where she can focus more on the traditional values of her students in order to be a more effective instructor. That stance is something she cherished at NTU, which she says sets it apart from other colleges and universities.

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“I could have gotten a master’s degree from anywhere else, but it wouldn’t be as meaningful as what I’ve learned here,” Yazzie exclaimed. “I think that’s why it’s meaningful, because it’s from a traditional perspective and because it identifies who I am.”

Yazzie’s perspective was enough to convince Cheyenne Sloan of Yatahey to enroll in the Navajo culture program. Sloan, 19, graduated from Thoreau High School.

“That’s what I’m going to major in next year,” Sloan said. “It seems exciting and fun.”

NTU was established in 1979 to meet the educational and cultural needs of Navajo students. The university offers a variety of undergraduate programs and a limited number of graduate programs.