

Cultivating teachers for greatness

By Guy Priel
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The mission statement, although simple, speaks volumes about hope for the future of Indigenous people. "One day, all the children in this nation will have the opportunity to attain an excellent education." That is the dream and hope that defines the mission of the 30 teachers enrolled in the 2019 Corp of Teach for America in Gallup. Their T-shirts summarize the mission statement as "Excellence and Equity for all."

Comprised of a diverse group of people from places as far-flung as New York and Washington state, they have all come together to cultivate their interest in the next generation of New Mexicans. They gathered for a three-day orientation in Gallup that will be followed by a training session in Tulsa, Okla. As they begin preparations for the upcoming school year.

The focus of the Teach for America program is to demonstrate resilience, learn continuously, act with humility, choose courage, strengthen community, pursue equity and achieve impact.

Speaker Al ray Nelson, one of many inspirational speakers over the three-day event, said that former Governor Martinez took great steps to help Native American and Latino students success and it is a program that has continued under the current administration.

"I see a lot of optimism among local students," he said. "We need to use education as a way to not fail the next generation. Let's not remove ourselves from our community."

Nelson went on to say that there are certain goals that need to be met and one of them is to protect the sovereignty of the Nation. "I tell students to get educated and come home and be the next leaders so we can protect our sovereignty. That is the one thing that can be taken away from us so we need education as a tool to protect our Nation. We need to protect the land and our heritage and education is the key."

Cynthia Nava of Corrales, executive director of Teach for America, a former school superintendent and state legislator, said the entire two-year program is funded through grants to the state of New Mexico and participants are guided by instructional coaches throughout the two-year commitment.

"Seventy percent of participants remain in education after their two-year commitment ends," she said.

Megan Wedderburn, Gallup's coordinator of Teach for America New Mexico, said there are 223 Teach for America alumni in New Mexico and there is a 90 percent retention rate for teachers choosing to continue teaching beyond the two-year corp program.

"Our function as coaches is to cultivate them for greatness," she said.

Emanuel Loley, who works at Navajo Technical University in Crownpoint motivated the group with his own personal story of how education failed his ancestors. "Education helps us recognize our place and connection in the earth," he said.

He said that the approach used by the Native Boarding School program separated Native peoples from their homes and the earth. The goal now is to reclaim Indigenous knowledge and reconnect to the earth. His grandfather was a sheep farmer on the Reservation before he was removed from his family and sent to California to be educated in Western philosophies and was then left to find his own way back home, which he funded through odd jobs as he walked back to the Reservation. His grandmother left school in the sixth grade to help raise her siblings. His mother went on to become the first generation of his family to graduate from college and she went on to become a teacher.

“It is up to us to get a Western education and make it work for us, we were told,” Loley said. “We have made it. We reclaimed our education and our culture. That is why I support Teach for America. They recognize that Indigenous knowledge is important.” He graduated from Fort Wingate High School, attended Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio, the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe and is now working toward a PhD at the University of Denver.

“I recognized that Native students were receiving a disservice in the New Mexico public education system,” Loley said. “Teachers need to recognize that students are important and can impact their students’ future. Two years of quality teaching is better than 12 years of crappy teaching. Tribal colleges are impacting change in our community.”

He said there is a need to access Pre-Colonial knowledge again and storytelling is an important part of that process. He helped develop the Emerging Dine’ Writer’s Institute and the Dine’ Writers Collective to help Native people think critically about their place in the story and how to reclaim their narratives.

“We are as strong as the prayers of our ancestors,” he said. “You are here because you are the result of someone’s prayers. Clans preexist our names and each clan has a responsibility to the next generation.”

Becca Heinsohne, a member of the Zuni Pueblo and an alumnus of Teach for America, said, “Indigenous needs are in the forefront of the program. Ancestral knowledge, power and equality are an important part of sharing our narrative.”

The group spent part of the day on Tuesday at the Community Pantry, where Executive Director Alice Perez provided highlights and information that participants can use in the schools where they will be assigned. Then, the participants got their hands dirty helping in Hope Garden.

The diversity of participants is reflected by a young lady who only wants to be known as Tracie, a Navajo and graduate of Crownpoint High School, who attended Smith College in Massachusetts, where she was among a handful of Native students. She studied American Studies with an emphasis on Indigenous populations. She was motivated to lead by example and joined Teach for America at the urging of a teacher who was part of the program in 2010. She said the teacher was very honest, “more honest than any teacher I had had previously.” She decided to join through a program called College Horizons and started as an intern in 2012. She graduated from Smith in December and is hoping she will be assigned at Crownpoint High School in the fall.

“I want to have a positive influence and believe there is value in community,” she said.

Guthrie Meeker, another participant, is older than the average member of the group, who normally come right out of college. At 38, he is the oldest member of this year’s Corp. Originally from Montana, he dropped out of high school when he was 16 and traveled the country, eventually earning his GED and

joining the Army, where he served for five years in Nigeria and Afghanistan. He received a Master's Degree in history in 2017 and found himself in upstate New York teaching prison inmates through a 2nd Chance program funded by the U.S. Government.

"Education drives recidivism down," he said. "Many prison inmates are high school dropouts who have experienced trauma" He joined Teach for America so he could help kids who are in trouble and need support from someone who understands them and he wanted to focus on adverse populations. "People of color in the prison system are treated as adults and have no chance, whereas white teens are treated as teens and have better chances through education. My story has impact and I am passionate about bringing change through education." He plans on remaining in education to at-risk populations when his two years are finished. He will be at Gallup High School in the fall.

According to its Website, Teach for America is a non-profit organization founded in 1989 and serves 52 communities throughout the United States. It recruits graduates from top universities to "develop and mobilize as many of the nation's most promising future leaders as possible to grow and strengthen the movement for educational equity and excellence" in low-income schools.