




## Winsome Witnesses: Celebrating Native American Heritage Month—All Year



*Although I am not obligated to any person, any culture, or any social norms, I have humbled myself for the sake of all people in order to connect with all people. I adjust my thinking to that of how a Jew would think to connect with Jewish thinking.... I learned what it meant to be like a person weak in the faith to help those who are weak in the faith. I have become all things to all people, so I may connect with them as much as possible. I do this intentionally for the sake of the gospel so that my witness may be winsome. (The message of Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, paraphrased by Chevon Petgrave.)*

“It’s so good to be home!” These words were spoken by a second-grade student as she entered the girls’ dorm at Holbrook Indian School (HIS). Her mother had just dropped her and her older sister off late Sunday evening, after all of the other students had gone to bed. Their mom had been drinking, and their time with her was less than they’d hoped for when she had picked them up on Friday afternoon for home leave. It would be easy to be mad about their mother’s irresponsible behavior; however, her brokenness is a symptom of generational trauma set in motion by the policies of the United States government toward Indigenous people throughout our country’s history.

 Among those policies was the establishment of boarding schools aimed at destroying all aspects of Native culture in an attempt to assimilate Indigenous people. Before long, the devastating effects of these policies began to emerge: poverty, depression, suicide, addiction, abuse, broken families and communities, lifestyle diseases...the list goes on.

In 1990, National Native American Heritage Month was established. According to the National Congress of American Indians, “This is a time to celebrate rich and diverse cultures, traditions, and histories and to acknowledge the important contributions of Native people.”

HIS faculty and staff work to help students find healing from centuries of inhumane practices by reconnecting them with their cultural heritage, not only during the month of November but throughout the year. One way HIS does this is by providing students classes in Navajo language, history, government, and Indigenous arts. Students also experience hands-on learning in agriculture classes.

### **Diné language**

The majority of students at HIS are Navajo or Diné, which means The People. The Native language class at HIS





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focuses on the Navajo language: Diné Bizaad. In the early boarding schools, children were forbidden to speak their Native languages and were often punished for doing so. Ironically, American Indian languages were instrumental in the positive outcomes of World Wars I and II, when American Indians who were fluent in their traditional tribal language and in English were used to send secret messages in battle. The most famous among these are the Navajo Code Talkers. Throughout the past 75 years, many students who have attended HIS had fathers, uncles, grandfathers, and great uncles who were Code Talkers. Today most students do not speak in their Native language. Yet many of their grandparents only speak Diné. By teaching students Diné Bizaad, HIS hopes to help reconnect Native youth with their elders.

### **Navajo history**

Most people are familiar with the Trail of Tears, but have you heard about the Long Walk? A little less than 100 years before HIS was founded, Kit Carson began his campaign against the Navajo by using a “scorched earth policy” in which he burned their crops in an effort to ruin their ability to sustain themselves. This destructive war resulted in the removal of the Navajo from their homeland—the Four Corners area (Colorado, Utah, New Mexico, and Arizona)—to Southeastern New Mexico. Carson forced more than 8,500 men, women, and children to walk across New Mexico to be imprisoned at the Bosque Redondo Reservation, over 400 miles from their homes. Along the way, 200 Diné people died from exposure and starvation. Once they arrived at Bosque Redondo, the Diné were given substandard food, causing illness, and they were plagued by deprivation, disease, and death. One out of four people died. Eventually the military admitted the effort was a failure and allowed the Diné to return home.

As part of their history class, HIS students retrace the steps their ancestors took. This helps students understand the experience of their ancestors that continues to affect their lives today.

### **Navajo Nation government**

According to the Navajo Nation government website, the Navajo Nation now extends into the states of Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico, covering 27,000 square miles. Navajoland is larger than ten of the 50 states in the U.S. The total population of the Navajo Nation is nearly 400,000, making them the largest tribe in the United States. In 1923, a tribal government was established. Since then, the Navajo government has evolved into the largest and most sophisticated form of American Indian government in the United States. Each year, HIS students visit the Navajo Nation capital in Window Rock as part of their Navajo government class, where they learn firsthand how its three-branch system of government operates. Of the 400,000 registered Navajo, 180,500 are listed as living on the reservation. The median age is 24, the average household income is \$8,240, with 43 percent of the population living well below the poverty rate. Only 56 percent have graduated high school and only 7 percent have a college degree. The reality of these statistics poses a myriad of challenges for government leaders. Helping students understand the challenges they face empowers them to rise above those challenges.



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### Indigenous arts

One of the best ways to celebrate a peoples' culture is to continue the traditions of their arts. Pottery making, weaving, and beadwork are fast becoming lost skills. The Indigenous arts classes at HIS focus on traditional practices while inspiring students to tap into their creativity to produce new works of art. Art provides many benefits for mental health and emotional well-being, which include a sense of accomplishment, an increase in initiative, and improved concentration. Studies suggest that art can be valuable in treating depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and even some phobias. At the very least, it is a great way to express emotions. Holbrook Indian School's Indigenous arts classes allow students to learn about the artistic skills from various tribes. Students are able to appreciate and preserve their cultural heritage and gain confidence.

### Agriculture

Before the U.S. expansion into the West, the Navajo sustained themselves by farming and sheep herding. When those who survived returned from their imprisonment at Bosque Redondo, they had no means to provide for themselves and relied on government rations until they were able to rebuild. The fact that the Diné are the largest tribe in the United States speaks of their resiliency; however, food scarcity and poor nutrition remain a reality for the Navajo. Teaching students about traditional farming methods helps sustain the Navajo way of life. By learning how to grow traditional crops such as corn, beans, and squash—known as the Three Sisters—students learn the value of good nutrition and the impact it has on their families and communities.

### Appealing to common beliefs



One thought-provoking aspect of Native traditions that is critical for helping students find healing is understanding their traditional beliefs. In the past, well-meaning missionaries equated all Indigenous practices as pagan and forced people to give up their traditional beliefs. Most Native traditions teach of the Creator. HIS introduces students to their Creator as a personal Being who cares for and loves them. When students are pointed to object lessons in nature, they can more easily understand who their Creator is and their relationship with Him. Like Paul's method in his appeal to the Greeks about their 'unknown god', appealing to common beliefs in creation stories is another way to connect with students in their spiritual journey. It is helpful to meet students where they are.

Spirituality among most Native Americans is a way of life, like the Navajo tradition of the Beauty Way—the concept of living in an integrated environment of beauty, balance, and harmony, derived from the Diné word hózhó. The Beauty Way cultivates community that nourishes and supports individuals as they walk together. It is the action of living harmoniously with all of life as it is unfolding—to live in harmony with the Creator, the natural world, with one's own self, and with loved ones.

Students are pointed to texts that resonate with their traditions, like "Live in harmony with one another" (Romans



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12:16) and “How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity” (Psalm 133:1). They also learn that their Creator made all that is good and beautiful for them because He loves them.

Knowing where they came from helps students understand the world they are living in now. When faced with overwhelming traumatic experiences, Native children are often told, “It’s just the way it is, and you just have to get used to it.” HIS faculty and staff don’t want students to settle for the way things are or get used to the ills that plague their post-colonial society. By celebrating Indigenous cultures and educating students about their heritage, HIS aims to empower its students to break the cycle of poverty and abuse and gain back that which was taken from them.

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*Diana Fish has served in her role as the Director of Development at Holbrook Indian School since 2015. Established in 1946, Holbrook Indian School is a first- through twelfth-grade boarding academy owned by the Pacific Union Conference.*