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Chief Mountain

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Colorado River officials will descend on Las Vegas this week. Here's what to know

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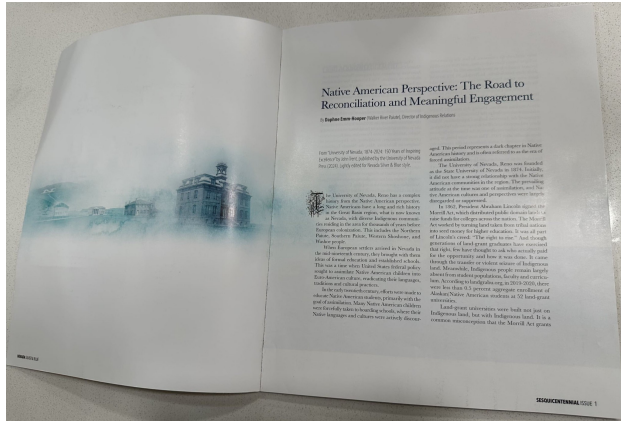


The beautiful ancestral homeland of the Blackfeet of Montana, with their sacred and majestic Chief Mountain as the backdrop.

150 Years of Whitewashing: UNR’s Continued Colonial Legacy

In some ways, the university’s Sesquicentennial Celebration leaves indigenous history, context and perspective behind

By [Makai Zuniga](#) • [Essays](#) • November 26, 2024



The UNR 150th anniversary magazine begins with a section on Native peoples, but is only three pages. Photo courtesy Makai Zuniga

My name is Makai Zuniga, and I am a Northern Paiute (“Numu”) citizen of the Reno-Sparks Indian Colony. Unlike many residents of Nevada, myself, my relatives, and the Indigenous peoples of the Great Basin are the only true “Native Nevadans.” This distinction is one I am compelled to make; otherwise the colonial history, and the legacy of Manifest Destiny is left uncontested.

Furthermore, I am writing this essay to call attention to the media campaign that the University of Nevada, Reno has been undergoing this year to celebrate its 150th anniversary, and specifically how this campaign fails to address the institution’s role in the ongoing erasure of Native Nevadan histories.

The University of Nevada, Reno has always held a significant role in the Reno-Sparks community as it is widely considered the premier higher education institution in Northern Nevada. For me personally, the university has consistently been integral to mine and my family’s lives. As a boy, cool fall weather meant trips to Mackay Stadium with my mother, and brisk spring semester evenings were for basketball at Lawlor Events Center. As a teenager, Lawlor became a milestone for Washoe County high school graduates, as every June, graduates attended their ceremonies at the arena. In June of 2017, I shared in this local milestone, even giving a commencement speech in the middle of Lawlor to my fellow Reno High School graduates.

Four short years later I received my bachelor’s degree from the university, and in a full circle moment, commencement was held at Mackay Stadium. It was drizzling on May 15, 2021, when a Northern Paiute elder began to give a traditional blessing in her aboriginal language prior to the start of the graduation. I, along with several hundred students, watched the jumbo screen for several minutes while the elder’s words were subtitled merely as “Numu Blessing,” even though

other speakers had their words fully transcribed. It was apparent to me that the university was willing to make a show of inviting the elder onto stage, but it was too much effort to transcribe the intimate and ancient prayer that had been shared with us.

The day of my graduation from UNR is a happy memory of mine, but it comes with the constant reminder that the institution consistently makes hollow efforts to address its colonial history.

Editor's Note: The University of Nevada, Reno makes the following land acknowledge statement at the beginning of its [Sesquicentennial Celebration](#) website and magazine:

“We acknowledge that the University of Nevada, Reno is situated on the traditional homelands of the Numu (Northern Paiute), Wašiw (Washoe), Newe (Western Shoshone), and Nuwu (Southern Paiute) peoples. These lands continue to be a gathering place for Indigenous Peoples and we recognize their deep connections to these places. We extend our appreciation for the opportunity to live and learn on their territory.”

This year marks the 150th anniversary of the foundation of the University of Nevada, Reno. The Nevada Silver & Blue, the official magazine of UNR, published a ninety-six page “Sesquicentennial Issue” and similarly, the official UNR YouTube channel posted a commemorative video. This media blitz is meant to be a celebration of the university, its graduates, and its rich history. However, the institution seems rather selective in the history it decides to highlight, and even romanticizes the historical tropes of Manifest Destiny. There is a failure to adequately confront the Native American genocide and Indigenous displacement that the university is built upon, as I will expand upon.

The Sesquicentennial Issue: Colonial Validation

Those who have read the Sesquicentennial Issue might be quick to ask, “but doesn’t the magazine begin with the ‘Native American Perspective: The Road to Reconciliation and Meaningful Engagement’ and accompanying ‘Land Acknowledgment?’ Director of the Indigenous Relations program at UNR Daphne-Emm Hooper, Walker River Paiute, pens the opening article. This section correctly enumerates the Tribal Nations that have called Nevada home since time immemorial, addresses the problematic nature of land-grant institutions, and the lack of Native peoples in higher education. At the bottom of the page there are several images of a beautiful mural honoring Indigenous histories of the Great Basin. The artist Autumn Harry, a citizen of the Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe, has an inspiring quote calling for students to learn about the nations that call the region home and to think about the legacy of colonization.



The UNR 150th anniversary magazine's Native section lasts three pages, with small images of a large mural at the bottom. Photo courtesy Makai Zuniga

The “Native” section is only three pages, with the third page being almost entirely blank, with three small images that fail to honor the beauty and importance of Harry’s mural. Thus, when I

first saw how small this section was, I was reminded of the Numu elder on that rainy day at Mackay.

UNR had once again invited Native peoples to the table, but this invitation is once again hollow.

Later in the magazine, there are full page, color images, even a pull-out section, on the “Joys of Commencement.” If the Silver and Blue spared no expense on this section, Harry’s mural should have equally been a full set of pages to showcase the intricate details.

The reader might once again ask why I am so displeased with the section. How is this nothing more than a demonstration of the University’s good faith to highlight Indigenous peoples?

Shortly after this section, and through the entirety of the magazine, settler-colonial history is glorified, romanticized, and rarely if not ever condemned. See pages 26–27 where there is a Manifest Destiny-esque portrait of a pioneer style wagon, accompanied by language detailing the dangers of settling the West. The article describes how dangerous “traveling West” was for the settler Hannah Clapp, and nowhere is it mentioned how dangerous her journey was for Nevada tribes. The influx of white settlers to the Great Basin, who sought to exploit mineral resources, had catastrophic effects for all tribes in the region. Nowhere in this section is the Indigenous response to the presence of invaders in their homelands, or the devastating impact that white settlement had.

[What is the Ruby Valley Treaty and Why Should You Know About It?](#)

Furthermore, see page 32 where famed settler John Mackay is described as “exploring a vein of low-grade ore” in Virginia City, Nevada. “Exploring” is certainly a euphemistic verb in that sentence; I hardly think my ancestors would have described Mackay as having been “exploring.” More likely “trespassing” or even “thieving” would have been more comparable.

Mackay’s statue is discussed on pages 32–33, and the controversial history of the statue’s sculptor having documented associations with the Ku Klux Klan is referenced. “Documented associations” with the KKK is almost certainly an understatement, as the Mackay sculptor, Gutzon Borglum, has been described as a card-carrying member of the Ku Klux Klan. When speaking about Black people, Borglum stated they had, “eaten into the very moral fiber of our race character.” He was also deeply anti-Semitic, in an essay titled “The Jewish Question,” he stated “Jews refuse to enter the mainstream of civilization, to become producing members of the world community. They do not share or create, but choose instead to clannishly hold onto their old ways and with mere money buy and sell the efforts of others.”

Thus, the university has effectively decided to sign off on Borglum’s legacy by choosing to leave the statue on campus as the administration believes it will “...help bring awareness to the impact of Nevada’s settlement... [on] Indigenous lands and people.” This is comparable to telling the descendants of African slaves that statues of Confederate generals serve as “springboards” for holistic discussions. This rationale is merely an excuse to maintain the status quo, which in turn perpetuates harm to the affected communities.

To Native peoples, the Mackay statue is nothing more than colonial romanticization— where a settler is depicted with a trademark pickaxe and stolen ore in hand. The statue is a symbol of the Anglo-settler belief that the West was an economic opportunity— an empty landscape waiting to be civilized. However, this belief was only actualized through the systemic ethnic cleansing and subjugation of the Indigenous population.

If UNR President Brian Sandoval and the university wished to bring awareness to the impact of Nevadan settlement on Indigenous peoples they should replace the statue with a Native person. Truly, how lazy and morally bankrupt to say the statue of the colonizer is somehow the best way to revisit the ethics of westward expansion. How is this anything other than a lazy explanation to allow the racist and bloody legacy of Manifest Destiny to continue on campus?

If you believe a statue can help address the sins of the past, find the courage to replace the symbol of colonization with those who fought against the legacy of Manifest Destiny— such as the Dann Sisters.

Mary and Carrie Dann were Western Shoshone (Newe) land defenders, water protectors, and spiritual leaders who fought for almost fifty years as they attempted to assert their treaty rights to aboriginal land title in Crescent Valley, Nevada. Their legal proceedings made it to the United States Supreme Court, and they garnered global attention as the federal government spent millions fighting two elder Shoshone women. As a result of the Dann Sister's advocacy, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) would rule that the United States violated the UN's anti-discrimination policy in its treatment of the Western Shoshone. CERD also urged the U.S. to “freeze”, “desist from”, and “stop” actions taken against the Western Shoshone peoples. The resistance efforts of “two little old ladies,” made it all the way to the highest court of the United States, and even across the globe to Europe.

Thus, UNR has the chance for redemption. Replacing the Mackay statue, which was crafted by a White Supremacist, with the Dann Sisters, sculpted by a Native artist, would clearly demonstrate a true commitment to Indigenous communities.

Outside of the first three pages there are only a few mentions of notable Indigenous UNR graduates. See page 41 where the late Randy Melendez is mentioned in the article. If you were reading this section and were not already aware of who Randy Melendez was, you might not have even connected that he was a citizen of the Reno-Sparks Indian Colony as it is not clearly stated. Also, despite Melendez being described as an incredible community leader in his own right, he is being used to exemplify the magnanimous nature of Professor John Trent, Sr. There is not an accompanying image of the deeply influential Melendez, and the success of his legacy is attributed to a white professor.

See also page 66 where Joe Bliss, the first holder of an NCAA boxing title from UNR is briefly described. Bliss was a citizen of the Lovelock Paiute Tribe, a U.S. Army veteran, and a deeply accomplished boxer—eventually being admitted into the UNR Athletics Hall of Fame. It is mentioned that Bliss was a student at the Stewart Indian School in Carson City, Nevada—which is where he fostered his talent for boxing. However, there is no mention about the odious history of the Stewart School, or Indian Boarding Schools in general. Bliss is described as having “discovered boxing in the third grade,” which assumes that Bliss was complicit in pursuing the

sport. However, oral histories from Stewart survivors confirm that students were often forced to fight each other by staff members. Thus, the trauma and historical impact of Joe Bliss being a Native man who attended an Indian Boarding School is effectively erased.

This erasure is finally cemented on the following page, 67, with the article “*And the Cities Rise Like Dreams.*” Penned by composer Steve Danyew, Danyew discussed the song he was commissioned to create for the 150th Anniversary. When describing his inspiration, Danyew fully embraces Manifest Destiny—citing the story of the American West as “its growth from a quiet wilderness to a bustling region.” This erasure of history is both false and disturbing, but is also a perfect metaphor for the university’s hollow commitment to its tribal communities. Thriving cities, societies, and cultures have been in the Americas far before the first settler set foot in the American West. Where the incredible significance of Joe Bliss’s achievements were underreported on one page, the adjacent page is nothing but a validation of colonial erasure.

Throughout the Sesquicentennial Issue, my indignation slowly grew into numbness, and the cherry on top of UNR’s failure came on page 77. The article titled “Charting the Wolf Pack Way: Academics and Research” details a group of UNR psychologists who taught a chimpanzee American Sign Language in the late 1960s. The psychologists named the chimp “Washoe,” and the author of this article writes that “Washoe is just one example of the many ways the University... [has] inspired excellence since 1874.” It should be clear that naming a monkey after the Washoe People was beyond unacceptable in the 1960s, and it is beyond unacceptable today. The very fact that the school used this unabashed racism as an example of “inspiring excellence” is a true testament to its indifference to the Indigenous community.

In UNR’s 150th anniversary magazine, an article states that a monkey, named Washoe, was “just one example of the many ways the University... [has] inspired excellence since 1874.” Photo courtesy Makai Zuniga

Moving Forward

It is undeniable that the Silver and Blue and UNR owe the Washoe Tribe of Nevada and California and all Washoe people an apology. The university also owes its Native students and the Great Basin Indigenous community an apology for naming a monkey after the Washoe Tribe. Moving forward, the magazine and the university would be wise to include more Indigenous peoples in the editing room to prevent such a racist stain from being published.

Additionally, the university must stop with its hollow attempts at Indigenous inclusion. Saving two pages at the beginning of a magazine to have Native faculty briefly discuss the colonial history of UNR’s foundation is not enough. Especially when this section is immediately followed up with the symbols of colonial destruction, demonstrating the very erasure that Hooper’s segment addressed. UNR, please have more meaningful invitations to Indigenous communities to participate. A token land acknowledgment is meaningless without good faith efforts to rectify the colonial history.

Finally, UNR has a chance for redemption. As mentioned above, replacing the Mackay statue, which was crafted by a White Supremacist, with the Dann Sisters, sculpted by a Native artist, would clearly demonstrate a commitment to Indigenous communities. The Dann Sisters spent

their lives fighting against the very legacy that Mackay, and Mackay's sculptor, represent to Native Peoples. UNR President Brian Sandoval has already acknowledged the critical importance of the Dann's activism, leading an initiative that posthumously awarded the sisters with honorary doctorate degrees. Thus, the Dann Sisters replacing Mackay would have a powerful impact for every Native student on campus, and certainly for the Great Basin Tribes.

It cannot be denied that the history of UNR's foundation is directly tied to the genocide of Indigenous Peoples. Nevada served as a "bridge state" to California during the Gold Rush, and the subsequent "discovery" of minerals following the Comstock Lode led to a permanent influx of settlers. This influx created a scarcity of resources in a high-desert environment that was already experiencing scarcity. The diversions of water for agriculture, the destruction of game habitat, and the direct violence inflicted upon Native Peoples had catastrophic impacts. Native Nevadan Tribes, largely rural, are still recovering from and experiencing the effects of this trauma today.

Suggested Reading

['Prove it or lose it.' How tribes are forced to fight to secure senior water rights](#)

Despite the ugliness of this history, Native Nevadans are extremely resilient. This resiliency is directly related to unknown numbers of generations of land stewardship in the Great Basin. Tribal Peoples are, and have always, been connected to this land—including the very land UNR sits on. The university has certainly made efforts to include Indigenous communities, but I am once again reminded of the elder's un-translated prayer at my commencement ceremony. If tribal participation at UNR is only a performative nicety, then the university is continuing its colonial legacy.

I urge the University to take the necessary steps to ensure that the Indigenous erasure within the Sesquicentennial Issue of the Silver & Blue is not repeated for future publications. The Wolf Pack is an organization beloved by many Native Nevadans, including myself and my family, and I want my alma mater to make sure it fully realizes its commitment to Indigenous communities.

Pesa U (Thank You) Makai Zuniga

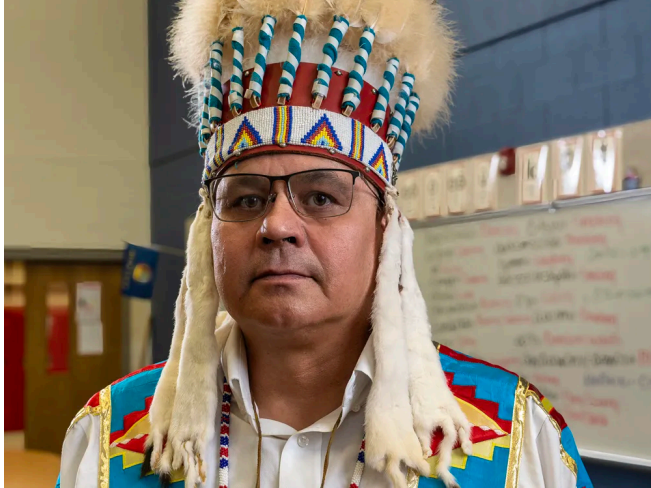
Makai Zuniga is a Numu (Northern Paiute) citizen of the Reno-Sparks Indian Colony and is a third-year law student at the William S. Boyd School of Law at UNLV. He currently serves as the President of the Native American Law Students Association, which seeks to prioritize Indigenous issues in Nevada. After law school, Makai intends to serve Indian Country and practice Federal Indian Law in his home state of Nevada.

Colorado River officials will descend on Las Vegas this week. Here's what to know

"With the dawn of a second Trump administration and a looming deadline for interstate negotiations, Las Vegas will turn its focus to the Colorado River this week. Scientists, nonprofit advocates, tribal leaders and negotiators from all seven states that rely on the river will attend the Colorado River Water Users Association conference at Paris Las Vegas beginning on Wednesday. Historically, it has been an annual forum to discuss the most pressing issues affecting water availability across the basin. On Nov. 20, with little notice, the Bureau of Reclamation [released a list of five paths forward](#) for critical deliberations about how to manage the river past 2026, when current guidelines expire. The brief descriptions of each offered few details. ... " [Read more from the Las Vegas Review Journal.](#)

Meet Montana's Teacher of the Year: Kevin KickingWoman

It is very rare for an American Indian who has deep roots in his culture, to receive teaching recognition in formal education. Here is his story. Dennis Zotigh



Montana's Teacher of the Year in his classroom proudly wearing his traditional stand-up bonnet of the Blackfeet Nation. Photo courtesy of Norwood Photography

"Since colonization began, Europeans who came to the Americas sought to eradicate Native traditions by forcing their system of mandatory formal education upon the tribes they encountered. Through this process, Christian and government boarding schools did much to eliminate Native languages and culture. Here is one success story honoring a tribal educator who is implementing modern curriculum to save his language."

The 2023-24 Montana Teacher of the Year, Kevin KickingWoman, is from the Blackfeet Nation. KickingWoman served in the Navy for four years and was based on the *USS Sacramento* in Bremerton, Washington, with accommodations and main propulsion engineering certification. KickingWoman has a Class 7 teaching certification, qualifying him as a Blackfeet cultural teacher. He earned a bachelor's degree in Native American studies and anthropology at the University of Montana in 2011 and a master's in interdisciplinary studies from the University of Montana in 2013.

KickingWoman has dedicated his career to teaching, learning, and sharing knowledge. He began his nearly 25-year teaching career at Browning Middle School in Browning, Montana, then became the Indian Education Director at Heart Butte Public Schools, also in Montana. He later worked as the Bridges to [the baccalaureate program](#) coordinator while serving as an adjunct professor at the University of Montana.

Today, KickingWoman teaches Blackfeet language and culture in grades 9 through 12 at his alma mater, Browning High School. KickingWoman also practices Native ceremonies and traditions and is an active member of many of the tribal societies of the Blackfeet people. His passion for Native singing has brought him respect, acclaim, and knowledge. His singing, sharing and teaching has impacted and enriched many lives. Currently, KickingWoman and his wife Joni have five children and a granddaughter, Kookaakii, who is his pride and joy.

We interviewed Mr. KickingWoman about his heritage and how it has played an important role in his educational endeavors. Below are his answers:

Can you give us your Native name, its English translation and/or nickname?

My Indian name is Kookii. It means “Corner Post.”

What tribe are you and where do your people reside?

I am Aamsskáápi Piikáni. I come from the Southern Piikáni (Blackfeet people). I live in a little place called Ithonio (Browning, Montana). There are four bands of us. Three are in Canada divided by the 49th parallel. Those are the Aputsi Piikáni, the Kanai and the Siksika. And so were the Aamsskáápi Piikáni living down in the United States on about 1.5 million acres of original Blackfoot territory.

What cultural events do you participate in?

I participate in a lot. I am a keeper of songs. So, one of the major things that is coming up is when the first thunder happens. When that happens, we start to congregate and start calling each other that we need to get ready for a dance. And men and women that are making their vows, perhaps they're sick during the year. So, they make their vows for healing and dance with a pipe. And then there is a series of songs that we have sung for thousands and thousands of years and still sung today. I participate in the Sundance. I do the Sweat Lodge. I do a lot of conducting those. And all through the years, the honoring of people, singing family songs, clan songs and society songs. One of the major events on the Blackfeet Reservation is the North American Indian Days, which happens in the second week of July. They have about six or seven hundred dancers, with about 30 to 40 drum groups that come. It's a pretty big celebration. And I also do a lot with the Glacier National Park. I'm part of what is referred to as the Native Speaker series. It's kind of new right now, and so we have about 15 speakers that go out and educate the public about Native philosophy and talk about Native culture.

What is a significant historical event that your tribe is most known for?

Again, North American Indian Days. I think it's like the 75th annual anniversary. Also, every year we give remembrance to the 64th Flood that killed over 200 people as well as the Baker Massacre with is a big event at home where in 1870 around December, Major Eugene Baker led a massacre of over 270 Blackfeet women and children and so we commemorate that every December.

Why is your tribal language important to the continuance of your culture and traditions?

Languages and defining characters are who we are. I tell my students I am Aamsskáápi Piikáni and I speak Blackfoot. I literally feel that if you lose the language, you lose yourself. And that is why language is so important. Language also softens your heart. I really believe that looking through the lens of a Native speaker, you see a whole different context that you're looking outside, or because everything's alive. It's anime. And so, it's just a beautiful language. That's something that resonates with people of all races.

Approximately how many members are there in your tribe and what percentage are fluent speakers?

We have 17,500 members. But there are only about 200 fluent speakers left. We are trying to change that.

How many students have you taught?

In my career? Wow, thousands I guess that come through the door. And my class load? I'm looking at 130 students a day because my class is an elective and so I have about 25 per class times seven periods.

How long have you been teaching?

Over my career of around 25 years, I kind of took some hiatuses. I served in the Navy and as a hot shot - fighting fires. But then I would go back to teaching. I think what really changed me is when I worked with a gentleman named Leon Rattler. He asked me to come down and work with some youth. In that little youth camp that we did in the summer, mainly to get into teaching and so ever since then at home they have a class seven teaching certification that language speakers can utilize. If you're a speaker, you get it signed off by the tribal leadership and can teach the language. So, what I have found is it's hard to go into a classroom without classroom management skills and what not. And so, I decided that I needed to go back to school and get all these tools.

Are you a descendent of any important tribal leaders?

I am a descendent of Chief Nanastico, Chief Mountain Chief and Mountain Chief that go way back to the late 1700's. Chief Mountain Chief was part of the Black Horse Society. There were a bunch of members and warriors in that society. But Chief Mountain Chief was very prevalent. And he had a son that he passed his name Mountain Chief to, who was very, very famous. You can Google him to see his picture.

What part of your tribal background inspired you to become an educator?

I harkened back to growing up in foster homes. There was a gentleman named Chief Earl Old Person who mentored my grandfather, George KickingWoman. Those two gentlemen were men you could ask them for anything, and they rarely ever said no. The humility that they walked with, I aspired to also walk with humility, to be generous every day, laugh and cry like they carried themselves. You could go up and ask them for advice on certain songs and they would take the time to help. They inspired me with their knowledge. They were like an encyclopedia. They inspired me to be a teacher because as Blackfeet, we have an obligation to give back with our knowledge because nothing was written and so like my grandpa used to say, "never be stingy because when you leave this earth, you take your knowledge with you. So, pass it on." This is what inspires me to change the youth while also continuing to learn from the elders.

Were there any obstacles you faced as a Native that challenged you as an educator?

One of the major obstacles that I face is that my parents went to boarding schools. What I am finding is kids are searching for their cultural identity asking their selves who am I? It's hard for them to find who they are because they are told it isn't cool to be Native. When we try and teach our ways, you have other Natives say, "I don't want my kids to learn that." And so those are reasons why are kids are so lost. I believe the only way back is by learning our language and songs. I have found that the trauma that our kids have today, I almost think it's a gene that is innate within us that we are fighting. Our people are asked, why don't we get over it? An elder responded, "When you put it in perspective, our ceremonies are from the past and we need these

ceremonies to heal the present so we can move forward into the future.” That’s the way I look at education. We need to go back to our ceremonies so we can feel it in the present. I feel bad for how our children are feeling now. They feel somewhat connected, without actually being connected.

How were you informed that you were Montana’s Teacher of the Year?

They kept it from me pretty good. It was funny because there were some fights in school the evening before. The next morning, I’m sitting in my classroom, and they call this assembly. I am not ready to go there, so I kept sitting for a while before I made my way to the assembly area. When I arrived, everyone including the principal are all sitting there waiting. Something didn’t seem right because they had a photographer there and I’m like, “We’re going to get in trouble, right? I still didn’t get what was going on until my family came in and superintendent called me forward. Then it dawned on me what was happening. To see my family there was the biggest surprise for me because I have a new granddaughter now and she won’t remember it, but I will. So that is how I found it so beautiful that my family and new granddaughter were able to share this special moment in time with me.”

What are some goals and objectives you have yet to achieve in your educational career?

One goal for me is to put out at least 20 fluent Blackfoot speakers through my tenure in grades 9 through 12. So that when they graduate, they will have the grounding and know what I know. One way of reaching these objectives is to implement a new Blackfoot writing system. The public schools have supported this and by doing so, are helping to standardize a uniform way of writing, and teaching the Blackfoot language so that each student at least learns to read it, write it, enunciate it and understand it.

Is there anything else you would like to add to this interview?

As I mentioned earlier, I grew up in foster homes with severe abuse and I also know the problems our kids face in our reservation. I try and make myself approachable to our kids and be someone that they can relate to. Part of the wisdom that I share is to not let hurt stand in your way. Always try hard and never give up. These are the types of encouragement that I share every day. I tell them, “Our ancestors suffered for you to be here today. So, the best thing you can do is do your best.”

Dennis W. Zotigh (Kiowa/Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo/Isante Dakota Indian) is a member of the Kiowa Gourd Clan and San Juan Pueblo Winter Clan and a descendant of Sitting Bear and No Retreat, both principal war chiefs of the Kiowas. Dennis works as a writer and cultural specialist at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C.

Read more of Dennis’ work at <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/blogs/national-museum-american-indian/author/dennis-zotigh/> Dennis Zotigh | [READ MORE](#)

