

Blackfeet Community College: *Building Tribal Teacher Capacity for Our Community*

October 3, 2018

Browning, Mt- Education truly makes a difference in our society as Blackfeet people and society as a whole. Our unique worldview is valid and important. This couldn't be more evident than in the lives of local teacher candidates at Blackfeet Community College. For students like Pat Armstrong of Heart Butte, Montana, education is more than a piece of paper received upon graduation.

"The 2+2 program has been such a blessing for not only me, but most importantly, the Blackfeet community," said Armstrong, a 4th-grade language immersion teacher at Napi elementary school. Living in today's world requires living in two worlds, living within two cultures, and finding that common ground. Being well versed in both is something Mr. Armstrong is passionate about, and the learning never stops. Armstrong is not alone in the program; he is accompanied by his wife Anna and his brother Everett, who are also in the Tribal Community Teacher Capacity Program (TCTC) at Blackfeet Community College.

"What makes this all the more special for me is my wife Anna will be graduating alongside me," said Armstrong who will graduate in the spring of 2019. "Our kids will have the pleasure to watch us graduate college together, and I know this will be an everlasting impression on them." The Armstrong brothers have a strong desire to succeed, made even stronger by a promise to their mother to graduate with their teaching degrees. In honor of their mother, the Armstrongs made a pact to finish together. Stories such as these are the fabric of resilience and determination of Blackfeet people to survive for each other and to succeed. Often it takes everything we have to keep going -- that is the legacy Blackfeet ancestors left for their people.

As the TCTC program moves forward into its third year, the strength of the program is invigorated by all of the students with similar, but different, struggles that all have the potential for a good ending. A common



theme throughout the TCTC student body is an appreciation for being able to be in their community and hold down a job while attending school.

Having the option of attending College in Browning is a life-changing opportunity for students like Angie Rose Pepion who would have had an even more difficult decision to leave home with her children to seek an education. "Going away to school is out of the question financially and

uprooting her children would not have worked out either," said Pepion "Having this 2+2 program is by far the best thing that could have happened for me, educationally."

Who would have guessed that a simple grant aimed to create teachers could have such an impact on community, economy and the Cultural future of its children. "This program is teaching how to incorporate Pikanii Cultural values into the classroom, this has opened my mind to become more aware of how much was lost to forced assimilation and what we as educators can do to bring back what we can. Attending ceremonies and having the opportunity to visit with elders hit me hard and it became apparent that native identity and ties to culture are important and I thought a lot about my own identity," said Pepion.

Jeremy Wells knew struggle all too well. He survived by working for a metal roofing company far from home, and did other jobs to make ends meet along the way. He felt stuck in this regiment and wanted more out of the life. His world changed the day he got a voicemail from Dee Hoyt explaining his acceptance into the program. According to Jeremy, the opportunity was epic, "Now when I use this term (get out of jail free card) this is what this program meant to me. Being Able to finally realize my dream to become a teacher was in reach. "The most epic phone call I ever received, it was life-saving," said Wells now a 5th-grade teacher at Napi elementary in Browning, Mt.

The 2+2 TCTC program is the life's work of Dee Hoyt and her dream to help her community the one way she knew how - through education. She won't tell you herself or brag about what she has done. Going above and beyond her duties as an employee at Blackfeet Community College putting many laborious hours working on grant application forms became Dee's life for-a-while according to her employees.

The Education Division hosts four employees: a coordinator, instructor(s), Division Chair and an assistant. " Working with a good team of people who are willing to do what it takes to the get-the-job-done for our students is what makes this job so successful for me, I get to help people on their way to becoming a teacher, that's rewarding," said Division Chair Assistant Wayne Smith. "Cheryl Madman is our TCTC coordinator and to-be truthfully without her, it would be very difficult to do my job to the standards we uphold. She and Dee both just get it done, whatever the hurdle may be. I learn a lot about being a teammate and An adult from them Both," added Smith.

Placing emphasis on "The Blackfeet way of knowing" within the classroom is a strength that teachers graduating from the program bring to the classroom. Blackfeet knowledge and wisdom about the natural world, enhances a western education. Knowing where and how Blackfeet fit into the world, and what the responsibilities are for the Blackfeet people, is important in the struggle to maintain a Cultural identity. That goes hand in hand with language revitalization also present in the school district.

The combined efforts of Blackfeet Community College President, Carol Murray, and Education Division Chair Dee Hoyt, University of Montana Western School of Education, Dr. Vikki Howard, and Browning Public Schools-Superintendent Corrina Guardipee, worked together to make this program come to life.

"The program is on track with its goals and objectives as TCTC moves into its third year. Our goal is to prepare 40 teachers by 2020, and we're on our way to accomplishing that," said Anna Ollinger, TCTC P3 Instructor.

If you or someone you know is interested in a future as an educator please feel free to stop and visit with our staff here at Blackfeet Community College- School of Education.

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