



## Finding My Roots

*Bridgette Mesa is an 18-year old high school senior who lives in Camas, WA. She is very involved in the Native American Youth and Family Center (NAYA), an organization that she reaches by a 20-mile bus ride from home. This fall she will attend The Evergreen State College where she plans to enroll in the Native American Studies program. She plans to focus on politics and family counseling, with the hopes of getting a Master in Public Administration so that she can specialize in tribal government management. Her story is based on an interview conducted by Kris Gowen.*

“You must be the change you wish to see in the world”

-Ghandi

I am an urban Indian enrolled in the Pascua Yaqui Tribe of Tucson, Arizona. I am also part Apache, Shoshone, and Mexican-American. I went to a traditional high school for the first two years of my high school career. Though it was really big I still felt caged in. There was no room for me to grow. Then I transferred to

CAP (Camas Alternative Program). It’s a small credit recovery program (about 200 students) and generally has a bad reputation. Still, I went there to focus and concentrate on school. At the high school I wasn’t truly learning anything but at CAP learning and experiencing is the norm. The Camas High School was too strict and impersonal for me. CAP, on the other hand, has structure but is more relaxed and the teachers are more one-on-one.

I soon became close with my garden teacher who helped me with my junior research paper which was on Native American culture and assimilation. Through gardening I was able to get back to my roots. My teacher was very knowledgeable, and we had many discussions about Native American people, assimilation, nature, reconnecting with the land, culture, traditions, spirituality, and much more. Because of my interest in Native culture, my teacher encouraged me to take an active role in her garden class. Within a couple of weeks I became the liaison between the students and the community garden members.

It was my first leadership role. We had our first batch of pumpkins and squash last spring.

For most of my life I identified with the Mexican people. Because I am brown, they accepted me, but I knew in my heart I didn’t fit into this culture. I felt like an outcast because I didn’t speak the language. They called me “India.” I laughed along with it and we joked around but in a way I felt they were laughing at me. Then I decided to make a change. Because I could no longer identify with the Mexican people and because of my experience at the garden, I decided to do my senior project on Native American culture, more specifically tribal leadership and assimilation. My paper is about how we need more and stronger leaders on the reservations. Many reservations are not necessarily the best places to be in the world. So I made a list of good qualities a true leader must have, and one of them was to be involved in the community. A true Native leader (any leader, in fact) is connected to her community and heritage. And I wasn’t. This is

where I bumped into something. There were so many things I didn't know about my culture. The only way I had learned about my culture was over the internet. And it is virtually impossible to become an Indian over the internet. So I decided to get more involved in the community by going to NAYA (Native American Youth and Family Center).

My mom had wanted me to go to NAYA for a long time – she had heard about NAYA through her involvement in the Native American Rehabilitation Association. She wanted me to take advantage of all the things NAYA had to offer like the employment program, High School Night, and teen counseling. She didn't want me to end up on the streets somewhere like the other kids. But I resisted just because I am stubborn and like to do my own thing. Eventually, I gave in and participated in NAYA's Summer Institute program and was able to get college credits and a stipend. I took math, writing, and ecology while at the same time working at the American Red Cross. I was able to get the job through the Siletz Tribe in a youth summer job program. I got A's and did really well. I also went to the Bow and Arrow club and helped make a Raven Puppet for a six foot man to be used in an up-

coming play performance. I started to attend pow-wows and Native American church meetings.

Another thing that enabled me to become more involved in my culture was when I found out about my family for my senior project. Like many other Natives back in the day, my great-grandmother was assimilated

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and was ashamed to even speak our language. So, she didn't teach our culture or speak the language to my grandmother, who didn't teach it to my mother, who couldn't teach it to me. Through the generations, my family's culture was lost. So when my mother talked to me about my family, it hit me here [puts fist to heart]. I realized that I am the result of assimilation. I had been writing about my culture as an outsider. I was detached from all the statistics I researched for my project. Then I found out I have family who live on the reservation in Arizona, but I never met them, because I never ever knew about them. My great uncle is vice-chairman of the tribal council. I was excited to learn this so I emailed him and he emailed me back. I thought it was

crazy that I had an uncle who was a leader like that. I also found out that the chair was actually a chairwoman. I thought, "Whoa, that might be something I could do."

Today things keep coming my way and I think of everything as an opportunity. It feels like I am just floating around, grabbing on to what-

ever I can, but I know where I'm going. I give myself space, but I have boundaries. I don't do drugs or mess around because that is outside of my boundaries. I can do whatever I want as long as I stay on my path. NAYA is definitely on my path; it is why I come.

I have become more confident in who I am. I have a better sense of who I am. I am a leader. I am stubborn. I can be organized. And I can influence people if I want to. For example, I have a friend who was into gangs. I started talking to her and influencing her, telling her that I used to hang with that sort of people. She has tons of time to change and she can do it gradually; she just needs to be careful and take care of herself, get an education and all. She is going to school more often now because of my words.

By coming to NAYA, I learned that I am not the only one who didn't know her culture. I was actually able to learn about my culture because of NAYA. There's a strong sense of community here. NAYA has definitely become my surrogate tribe. It's important for people like me to find a community and to be with people that we can identify with. Even if we just eat fry bread, it's something we do together. No one wants to feel that they are alone. Thanks to NAYA (and CAP), I was able to see that I will never be alone.

