

Native American Health Sciences

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Robbie Paul Creates Opportunities for Native American Students in Health Sciences

by Stevee Chapman

For young Natives interested in pursuing a career in the field of health and sciences, WSU's Native American Health Sciences (NAHS) program offers a plethora of resources to help them reach their goals.

Robbie Paul, director of NAHS, says that the main goal of the program is to increase the numbers of Native Americans entering WSU's Health Sciences programs, and assisting these students to help retain them in the program. NAHS does this by connecting the students to resources that will assist them such as tutoring, providing them with scholarship information, and monthly advising meetings.

Paul was first hired at the College of Nursing as the Native American Coordinator for Recruitment and Retention in January 1995. She said that initially part of the job was to create a pipeline program, which was the beginning of the Na-ha-shnee health science summer camp for high school students.

"The first several years we focused on nursing, but the students wanted to learn about other healthcare professions," Paul said. "This led to expanding the camp to include workshops on different health careers, and bringing in Native health care providers to be teachers and role models for the students."

Paul was raised on the Nez Perce Reservation in Craigmont, Idaho. She was the fourth of 5 children and lived with her family on a ranch on the Camas Prairie.

Her mother, Maxine S. Paul, was a non-Native of Irish, English, and German descent, while her father, Titus J. Paul, was a full blood Nez Perce.

"This was a mixed race marriage and for their time period, was unusual. They met in 1929, married in 1931, and remained married for 71 years," Paul said.

"I always knew that I was Nez Perce. I also thought that the Nez Perce were the only Indians, until one day in school the teacher was talking about other tribes and it dawned on me that there were other tribes," Paul said. "This so surprised me that I can remember going home that night and asked my father this; 'Dad how come you didn't tell me there were other Indian tribes?' He just shrugged his shoulders and said, 'I knew you would figure it out someday'."

Paul said that it was her parents who initially encouraged her to pursue a higher education.

"My mother started college the same year that I did, and she graduated the day before I graduated," she said. "My father, who attended Chilocco Indian Boarding School, also encouraged me. He felt that I needed to further my education. Both of my parents had the attitude that we are always learning. No matter how old you are, there are opportunities to learn."

Paul began her journey for higher education at the University of Idaho. It was a challenging time for her educationally, she said. In addition to changing her mind several times, she was put on academic probation after failing two semesters. She says this story is not an unusual one, especially for students experiencing independence for the first time.

"In essence I had to grow up and take personal responsibility for showing up to class, turning in homework, and learning how to study," she said.

In 1972 she graduated with a bachelor's degree in Clothing Textiles and Design.

Later, Paul returned to school to pursue a degree in Early Childhood Education to fulfill her desire to establish a daycare for children on the north side of Spokane. Since she already had a degree, Paul was able to complete her AAS in a year at Spokane Falls Community College. She then went on to start the Whitworth Presbyterian Church Day Care Center, where she served as the director for 7 years.

In 1994, Paul went on to earn her master's in Psychology at Eastern Washington University after going through the life changing experience of divorce.

"The issues of unresolved grief in my Native family history were a calling from both within me and my ancestors to begin looking at how to heal the grief and understand history," Paul said. "The course work was both healing and challenging."

During her time at EWU, Paul was hired by a grant to work with teens from seven rural eastern Washington high schools where she helped to develop summer course work and leadership skills which aided the students in becoming successful both academically and socially.

Finally, in 2007 Paul graduated from Gonzaga University with her doctorate in Leadership Studies.

"I chose Gonzaga University because of their leadership program, which could be designed to be interdisciplinary. This allowed me to incorporate my psychology background and continue to develop the healing journey of telling the family story," Paul said. "The program also allowed me to further research the concept of historical trauma and the effects this can have over several generations."



Robbie Paul (Nez Perce), director of Native American Health Sciences at WSU.

"Pursuing an education is an equalizer. Knowledge is power," she said. "Education is the process of learning how to learn, but also to keep on learning.

Paul believes that by earning a higher education, Native youth will not only challenge their personal growth but gain the skillset they need for whatever jobs they are interested in.

"Gaining an education is also part of our heritage I was taught to always do the best that I can," she said. "If you don't know how to do it, study the problem, ask the questions, and then try it again."

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