

Viki Eagle, what one passionate woman can do: giving back to native youth

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Interview of Viki Eagle

Ms. Viki Eagle is a recent graduate of Colorado University, majored in International Studies, and mastered in higher education. She is currently working at UCLA as a Native American student recruiter. Many people who know her recognize that she is a woman of action in the Native community. As a Lakota woman she was proud of her heritage and was very involved in the Native culture in Denver.

In 2012 she moved out to the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota after studying abroad in Japan. There she taught multimedia and photography classes to high school seniors with the AmeriCorps program for a year. She also volunteered as a bus driver during the weekends

and was very involved with the local high school. She gained strong relationships with the youth because she listened to what students were going through on the reservation, and what their life was really like.



Viki with photography display

After her volunteer work, Viki was as busy as ever, finishing her master's degree. She also organized various powwows on campus and founded a photography project called "Real Life Indian." The project's intent was to document Native American students and display the "modern Indigenous person." It showcases the identities and complexities of living in two worlds; where Native American inherited culture meets mainstream society. I was always curious about what drives this woman to work so hard, and, with a twinkle in her eye, she tells me Starbucks coffee has been a big help; and what she is planning to do next. With all that she has already accomplished at the age of 25, I think the future looks bright.

Question: How do you feel working in Pine Ridge has impacted you? What made you want to volunteer there?

In general I wanted to volunteer and get experience working at a high school. Growing up in Denver public schools, there were a lot of American Indian education programs that were geared to helping Native students to really connect with our identity and who we are and I just really enjoyed volunteering in the community. I got to know elders and different families, and I found a beautiful culture and way of

life. I really enjoy the Native aspect of community. I really liked that Native people in the city were able to join together and have powwows or have gatherings for elders. I enjoyed volunteering and giving back to that community. I was given a full ride to Denver University (DU) through a Native American scholarship. I knew that by receiving this scholarship for my education, I had the responsibility to give back to the community. I felt this motivation because I was able to receive free education and because of where we (Native Americans) are as people, I need to give back to the community I represent.



Enjoying community at a powwow

That was a big reason for my going to Pine Ridge. I never grew up on the reservation, and I really wanted to work with Native communities. My grandmother is actually from Pine Ridge. I wanted to understand what it's like and to find students that I want to work with in higher education. I want to help Native students get to college and graduate, so that they can give back to their communities. I really believe that the best teachers for these kids on the reservations are Native people because they can relate to the language, culture, and literature. These students really need someone that can relate to them. We really need to be raising Native leaders in general for the future.



Real Life Indian display

Question: Do you think it's a struggle for Native youth to seek higher education?



Absolutely. There are a lot of issues in public education that do not cater to the aboriginal people. There is not a lot of Native culture in the curriculum that interests Native students. Like reading English literature is fine and all, but these students need to be reading literature of their own history and culture and their own ways of viewing things. I think that is important because it gives a Native student a voice. US history is taught in a very linear Western way. That history doesn't feel as though it relates to them or pertains to them. I also want to make the point that I don't think that it is just a Native issue; but that this is a nationwide public education issue as well.

Question: What inspired you to create Real Life Indian?

Real Life Indian is a project that started with my friend. I wanted to increase the retention of Native students and I wanted to see Natives graduate from DU. DU is a private school that is predominantly white, so it's not the easiest place for Native students to be. So when I came back, I was talking with my friend Amanda, we were just talking about how to bring awareness to the administration that there are Native students here, that there are Native people in the Denver area, and with the history that the institution has, it should try to be more inclusive of Native students.

Things got a little hectic for me. I was a full time graduate student, was also working and interning on the side. But luckily in Los Angeles, the admissions department was really open to letting me continue Real Life Indian at UCLA. So I'm really looking forward to that.



Question: I was always curious, how do you organize powwows?

(Laughs) My high school teacher was actually one of the first people that taught me. She is Lakota and she was a Lakota Language teacher as well as a Native History teacher. Every year she organized a

powwow and in my senior year I started helping out. I have a cousin who sings in a drum group, so if I ever needed a drum group, I started with him. If I ever needed drums in a powwow, I would call him up. Then he took me to powwows and started introducing me to everyone in the community and in the powwow circle.

I think that when people think of my community building, they think it just happened overnight. However, I've been reaching out and helping set up powwows since I was 19. And I'm 25 now, and I finally feel like I know everyone in the community, so it took me six years to get where I am. Now that people know me they feel inspired by my ideas and want to support what I'm doing; but it definitely took a long time to get here.

It's all about volunteering and being available, talking to different elders and attending education programs that are there, talking with different youth educators. Once you have the community you can bring the institution to support them. You know every big institution has one, Yale has one, Harvard has one, so I thought why can't Denver University have one? You have Native students here; there is history in Colorado with Cheyenne and Arapahoe people. It should be a part of the institution. It took three years for them to double my budget. We started from a really small budget from Student Life. Finally, over the years I started going to different departments and talking to different faculty and staff saying "Hey this is what I'm going to do, can you help to donate to a powwow on campus?" Then by doing that our budget grew to four times larger than when we first started it.

Question: Did the University receive it well? Did you think more students were able to learn about Native culture?

Yeah, I mean, colleges like Denver University, you don't see a lot of classes that teach about Native culture. There are a lot of students that go to DU that are from out of state; so I think it's really important for them to learn about Denver culture. When I graduated from the school, I wore a blanket from a powwow because I wanted to show DU that they have college students here who are volunteering their time and putting on a powwow. I want to show that it is possible to keep your culture and get a degree and also give back to the community.



Images for Real Life Indian

Question: You did so much at Denver University, what do you hope to achieve in the future now that you're in Los Angeles?

With such a specialized position as a Native American recruiter, I hope that I can bring communities together, people together, students together. There is a huge population of Native students here that also want to give back and be good role models. And I'm there to encourage them to be a part of their communities and not forget them. To me, community building is so important because it's about building up families and bringing them together. And I think that is a very powerful thing.

And I think whatever you do it's so important to give back to the people. I was lucky enough to be born into a community that is open to receiving help. That's really what all my work is about.