

# Recruiting Native American Students to Penn

BY TINA PIERCE FRAGOSO

**WHEN I WAS EIGHT YEARS OLD** I marched on the Bridgeton, New Jersey, courthouse wearing a home-made t-shirt that said, “I’m a little Nanticoke Lenni-Lenape Indian and proud of it.” This protest in 1981 was a critical moment in my tribe’s quest for state recognition, which occurred a year later. My parents held leadership roles in the tribal community, and this meant I was continually exposed to the Nanticoke Lenni-Lenape culture and traditions. It’s probably no surprise that I had an insatiable thirst to know more about my people.

My grandfather always said, “Get as much education as you can, that’s something they can never take away from you.” He said that to me every time I said good-bye as I returned to college and graduate school. I didn’t understand the full impact of his words until I came across example after example of Native people who were denied education. He was adamant about education, and even forbade my mother to marry until she completed her teaching degree. I didn’t realize that each degree I earned was a significant accomplishment and a pathway opened for other Native people to follow. As my grandparents and parents set the path for me, my struggles and accomplishments encouraged others to move forward too.

My parents made it easy for me to speak up in class and to correct teachers and scholars when necessary. I took it for granted that going to college would be a similar experience. I had not realized that being at college away from home, and among a limited Native American community, would force me outside of my comfort zone.

As part of my oral history class and senior thesis, I had the chance to interview my parents and grandparents, and others in my tribal community. My grandparents were never really given the opportunity to have a higher education. For them, going to school meant giving up their Native identity. My grandfather attended school until 5th grade, when he was pulled home to work on the farm. My grandmother went to an all-Indian school in Delaware. She moved to New Jersey to live with her sister for high school, but had trouble with other students calling her names and fighting with her because she was a Native American.

When I started college at Princeton, I thought I would pursue sports medicine. I noticed the curricular offerings included Native American topics, such as literature, linguistics, and oral history. While the classes were not always the supportive environment I had hoped for, each one presented an opportunity to explore my identity and the history of my people. Today, I work in anthropology and Native American studies and tell the story of my people, the story my family did not have the opportunity to tell. I’m here to prevent Native people from feeling diminished by what they read in books, and to remind them they are not extinct or too assimilated; their culture still matters. I’m here to support those who continue to go through these types of identity struggles, while trying to pursue their education. Quite frankly, even today, it would be easier to go back to my home community in New Jersey than to work in an academic setting.



After attending graduate school in anthropology at Stanford University, I worked for my tribe, the Nanticoke Lenni-Lenape of New Jersey, for over seven years. It was a privilege to go back into my community and use my skills for the good of my people. I had an opportunity to design and implement a summer youth camp. The focus was to help teach our tribal youth to learn their traditions, and how to live a healthy life. We focus on dances, tribal games, gardening, and language. I also incorporated a segment on attending college and how to stand up for yourself and your community against stereotyping. Even though I now work in college admissions, I continue to return to the annual camp to work with tribal youth on achieving their dreams.

In 2009, I was hired by Penn's Office of Undergraduate Admissions. I joined the team to recruit all students regionally, yet with the opportunity to specifically recruit Native Americans. In 2010, I was named the first Coordinator of Native American Recruitment at Penn. In this role, I educate the Penn community about Native American issues and help Native students around the country find their educational home at Penn. But it doesn't stop there. Access to education is only the beginning. Having the tools and resources to fully engage in an academic environment without losing or hiding your identity is another set of challenges. I also enjoy staying connected to matriculated Native students.

When I started at Penn, I was happy to learn the University was a College Horizons partner with an expressed desire to host the program. College Horizons is

In June of 2012, Penn hosted the College Horizons program for Native American, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian high school students. The program helps prepare Native students to apply and attend four-year colleges. At right, Fragoso poses with her son Lewis at Penn's College Horizons event. *Photos by Vanessa Iyua.*

a non-profit organization that helps Native American, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian high school students attend a week-long college application boot-camp. It is designed to be culturally relevant and to assist in the successful matriculation of students into four year colleges. The program also anticipates the struggles students

will have at college and cuts straight to the heart of their cultural identity. In June 2012, we hosted College Horizons on Penn's campus. I spent a year working with Undergraduate Admissions and various partners across campus to make preparations for this historic event. The Greenfield Intercultural Center and Natives at Penn were especially helpful in making this program a success. I'll never forget how it felt to stand in the middle of Perelman Quadrangle with 100 Native students and over 40 College Horizons faculty, along with my colleagues from Penn Admissions. My father gave a blessing and enabled everyone in the circle to participate in a purification ceremony. We filled the area, and all of the anxiety and exhaustion I felt was lifted. In its place was a memory and connection to Penn that I will never lose. It felt like Penn was finally my space too. 🍀

**TINA PIERCE FRAGOSO** is Associate Director of Recruitment at the University of Pennsylvania. She is an enrolled member of the Nanticoke Lenni-Lenape Tribe of Bridgeton, New Jersey. Fragoso has served as a leading Advisor to the Native American Voices exhibition.