

BODY

AISES college members come from all over the world. You probably see some elements of your own life in theirs. And you — are on the path to success.



Shaina Johnson

OGLALA LAKOTA SIOUX
BLACK HILLS STATE
UNIVERSITY AND UNIVERSITY
OF SOUTH DAKOTA
Medical Biology

Medicine has always been an interest of mine, even as a young adolescent. Although the ride to my dream destination hasn't always been smooth, I've sought out opportunities to excel academically and fuel my passion for helping people.

I grew up in rural Porcupine, S.D., one of the eight districts on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. My family motivated me to apply myself from a young age. Their emphasis on education propelled me to apply for a scholarship through the Gates Millennium Scholars program in high school, which I won. I then was able to become a first-generation college student at Black Hills State University in Spearfish, S.D. Many of us Native Americans aren't encouraged to continue academics after high school, so I've tried to pave a path for my younger siblings. Even if I failed along the way, I aimed to inspire them with a model of resilience through the obstacles we face.

Applying to college is difficult enough without unwelcome criticism. Many of us are not encouraged to go on for further education, or we are held back by the lack of a support system or fear, and the fact that some people disparage a student's abilities because of where they're from or whether they were educated on a reservation can be discouraging. I didn't let their negativity stop me. I was a member of the National Honor Society, listed in *Who's Who Among American High School Students*, an All-American Scholar, and class vice president. »

The Student BODY

SHAINA JOHNSON

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to support the success of its Native students. In addition to the Center for American Indian Studies, BHSU hosts the American Indian Bridge Program and an American Indian Awareness Week. Student organizations at BHSU are the Lakota Omnicitye and our AISES College Chapter, where I served as secretary and president.

I've also been able to gain professional experience that's come with valuable insights in various areas of the medical field, including an internship with the Maternal Child Health Careers/Research Initiatives for Student Enhancement – Undergraduate Program, funded through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Through that program I was selected to intern with the

Tommy Rock

NAVAJO

NORTHERN ARIZONA
UNIVERSITY SCHOOL
OF EARTH SCIENCE
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SUSTAINABILITY

PhD Candidate



My interest is in environmental health because many of my relatives have been impacted by uranium mining on the Navajo Reservation. Almost a whole generation of people who used to be miners, including some of my relatives, have died of cancer.

I grew up in Monument Valley, a small rural town in southern Utah, and spent my childhood hiking in Olijato, which is part of Monument Valley, and exploring the abandoned uranium mines with my cousins. When I was growing up I spent a lot of time with my maternal grandparents, who influenced me to live the healthy lifestyle I continue today, which helps me relieve stress and sleep well. I strongly believe that you can improve your own health and well-being in this way. My grandparents also taught me to persevere and work hard in life. They used to tell me that no one can do it for you, so you have to do it yourself. In the end it's your life, and you have the opportunity to improve your quality of life.

After graduating from Monument Valley High School, I went on to receive my bachelor's degree in environmental geography and recreational management from Arizona State University and my master's degree in sustainable community from Northern Arizona University. My advice to anyone thinking of a major is do something you like, because once you get to where you want to be in life, work won't seem like work

Coordination of Rare Diseases at the Sanford Research Center in Sioux Falls.

This summer, I resumed working as a Bureau of Indian Affairs wildland firefighter. I was able to complete sawyer training this year and am now a Class A sawyer. I plan to continue with the program next summer.

Native Americans suffer from shorter life expectancy due to poverty, lack of health care, depression, suicide, and infant mortality. On the Pine Ridge Reservation, for example, there's an epidemic of diabetes, cancer, heart disease, and alcoholism. I'm currently a senior majoring in medical biology with a minor in chemistry at the University of South

Dakota, and I plan to apply my degree to a career as a physician. My life goal is to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to support our community, whether through developing preventive programs or working with policymakers to end health disparities.

So far resilience has helped me overcome challenges, confidence has allowed me to apply myself, and where I came from has molded me into the person I am today. I hope students from similar backgrounds will also be inspired to seek as many opportunities as they can. Don't let anyone's opinions prevent you from achieving your goals.

— As told to Shelby Nathanson

because you like what you do. I've been following that advice throughout my college career. I'm currently attending Northern Arizona University in the School of Earth Science and Environmental Sustainability PhD program.

Throughout my college career, I worked as a research scientist at the University of New Mexico and as an environmental specialist in the Public Water Systems Supervision Program within the Navajo Nation Environmental Protection Agency. I learned a lot from both positions, and the experience helped me understand why research is important to improving the quality of life on the Navajo Reservation in relation to environmental health and how the Navajo tribal government works.

Working at the Navajo Nation Environmental Protection Agency also piqued my interest in grassroots organizations. I saw that grassroots have a unique way of influencing change for the better. Nowadays, I am enjoying working with grassroots organizations in influencing change, and I am currently helping to start a new organization called Diné No Nukes, which focuses on educating and informing Navajo communities about environmental health issues. The organization aims to involve younger generations in this process as well.

As an undergraduate, I had little support from my family, but my friends

helped me a great deal. Then when I was doing my master's degree, I lost many relatives due to uranium mining. That made studying difficult at times. I had to go away for a couple days, and then go back at it. I know many families in areas that had previous mining are going through that difficult ordeal. Determination, curiosity, and ambition are the traits that have helped me to succeed in school despite difficulties.

Although I keep busy in college with my studies, I still find time to present my graduate research to undergraduate students as well as Native high school students. I want to show them that Native Americans can get their PhD degrees as well. My research focuses on abandoned uranium mines in the Navajo Nation and uranium in sheep. Many people do not know that uranium is a heavy metal, and it can get into your body in the form of alpha particles if you drink contaminated water, inhale contaminated dust, or get dust in a wound.

Today, my career goal is to work for the World Health Organization in the field of environmental health in order to help indigenous people. I especially want to make a contribution to try and help improve the quality of life pertaining to abandoned uranium mining. So far, I think I'm making progress toward that goal.

— As told to Michelle Ciccarelli



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