

honor your Self

HONOR

“DON'T BE AFRAID TO ASK FOR HELP. I TRULY BELIEVE ONE PERSON—A TEACHER, A MENTOR, A FRIEND—CAN CHANGE YOUR LIFE.”

Desi Small-Rodriguez, a member of the Northern Cheyenne Tribe who grew up in Lame Deer, comes from a family that believes strongly in education. “I was raised with the notion,” she says, “that the way you help your people and the way that you advance and make something of yourself is through education, even if you have to struggle.” So when Desi heard about College Horizons, a non-profit organization that helps Native students learn how to get into college, she jumped at the chance. Thanks to this experience, Desi went on to Stanford, where she received her Bachelor’s degree and then a Master’s degree in Sociology.

Life at Stanford wasn’t easy for Desi at first. “It was a huge culture shock,” she says. “But eventually I realized,” she says, “that if I worked hard, I could master anything that I pursued.” A lot of her strength, Desi admits, comes from appreciating the struggles that came before her. “Knowing that the history of my people, the Cheyenne, is very much a reality today is important,” she says. “Even though it might have happened 100 years ago, it’s still very much current. The history of struggle, of fighting, of being relocated to Oklahoma, walking back in the bitter cold and finally getting the reservation established and being able to live on our homeland. All of this is not history as much as it is our life as Cheyenne people. I take great pride in the struggles my ancestors had to endure for me to be where I am.”

Desi, who is now working in New Zealand on an inaugural tribal research project for the Tainui Maori tribe, plans to continue her work in Indigenous education and policy. “There are a lot of harsh realities and difficult choices that young people face growing up on reservations and in urban communities,” says Desi. “Believing that you’re capable of overcoming the hardships is crucial. Our education system isn’t perfect, but it’s our best chance for providing our children with a bright future and empowering our communities.”

“I’VE ALWAYS BEEN TOLD BY MY PARENTS THAT THERE ARE GOOD ROLE MODELS AND THERE ARE BAD MODELS. . . YOU MAKE THAT DECISION FOR YOURSELF. YOU CHOOSE WHICH KIND OF ROLE MODEL YOU WANT TO BE.”



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