

Resilience Kicks In: An Interview with Tabitha Tan (Diné)

This interview is excerpted from Being in Relation: Indigenous Peoples, the Land, and Texas Christian University, 1873-2023, co-edited by C. Annette Anderson, Theresa Strouth Gaul, and Scott Langston and forthcoming from TCU Press in early 2025.¹

Tabitha Tan attended Texas Christian University (TCU) as an undergraduate from 1994-1999, graduating with a degree in Environmental Science. She was part of a small but significant cohort of Diné students recruited to TCU in the 1990s, and she co-founded TCU's first iteration of a Native student organization that was active during the 1990s. A scientist with a successful career in business as Associate Principal Engineer for Mary Kay Corporate Quality, Tan continues to live in the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex. She is an active TCU alum and a guiding force behind TCU's Native American and Indigenous Peoples Initiative. Her interview details the importance of the support given by generations of strong women in her family and by faculty/staff mentors at TCU in helping her adjust to university life far away from the Navajo reservation where she grew up.

¹ Editorial method: The co-editors invited each contributor to the book to choose whether they preferred to write their chapter or be interviewed. Those who selected oral history interviews (including Tan) had their conversation recorded and transcribed. An editing process followed, in



Tabitha Tan speaking at the dedication of the Native American monument, TCU campus, October 15, 2018. Photo by Cristian Argueta Soto.

which the contributors had several opportunities to compare the edited version to the original transcription and review changes. Some elected to make substantial written revisions. Each contributor indicated final approval of the finished chapter.

Yá'át'ééh.

Shí éí **Tabitha Tan** yinishyé.

Naasht'ézhí **Tódik'Qzhi** nishítj.

Tó'aheedlíinii bashishchiin.

Bit'ąą'nii dashicheii, áádóó

Tábąąhí dashinalí.

Ákót'éego Diné Asdzáán nishítj.

Hello.

My name is **Tabitha Tan**.

I am from The Zuni Bitter Water People.

Born for The Water Flows Together People.

My maternal grandfather is from The Leaf People, and

My paternal grandfather is from The Water's Edge People.

In this way, I am a Navajo woman.

Life prior to coming to TCU

I am originally from Shiprock, New Mexico, which is on the Navajo Reservation. I was born and raised on the reservation. I left my hometown for a few years because my mom thought I needed to get a better education off the Rez. We moved to Albuquerque, and I ended up going to school at Albuquerque Academy up to my tenth-grade year. Then I was a rebel and I decided I wanted to go back to my hometown to live with my dad. I ended up going to Shiprock High School for my junior and senior year and I graduated from there with the class of 1994.

During your senior year, you have a lot of different colleges coming to visit our high school, and TCU happened to be one of them that came to visit my high school. There were two other students previously

that had gone to TCU, Robyn Mitchell and Michael Charlie. TCU at the time was aware of a Navajo Nation scholarship for Navajo Scholars called the Manuelito Scholarship. I still have my plaque. The Manuelito Scholarship is given to Navajo students who meet a certain GPA, a certain SAT/ACT score. At the time, I think it was a \$25,000 scholarship over four years. One of the initiatives that TCU had is that they were willing to match that scholarship. So that was an incentive, apparently. A representative from TCU came to Shiprock and spoke to the students, passed out the purple pens, my favorite color, and we just kind of had a conversation. I was there with three of my best friends from high school, and we're still best friends today.

We were very interested in going to TCU, obviously, from a financial perspective, knowing that TCU was going to match our scholarship. TCU invited the four of us to come out to Fort Worth to visit and TCU paid for our airfare. We stayed in the actual dorm, in Shelby Hall, and just had the TCU experience. We met up with Robyn Mitchell, our Navajo friend who was already at TCU. She took us on a school tour. We went around Berry Street and went to get Slurpees at the corner 7-Eleven and so forth. Then, we went to lunch, we went to dinner. We had dinner at a Mexican restaurant called Dos Gringos. It was the four of us, Robyn, and some other minority students, and then some of the administration from TCU. There were about twenty of us at this dinner. So we got to visit TCU and again for me, I was very attracted to TCU because it wasn't in New Mexico or Arizona. From there, we applied to TCU. I did get accepted. Did a submission, wrote a letter, an essay, and I got this nice big packet from TCU saying that I got accepted. And I was like, "Okay, great. This is my school of choice."

At the time I had gotten another scholarship, which was the Indian Health Service Scholarship. That was also a full scholarship, and I put TCU on the application. In the midst of all that, I decided to go to a whole other school, which was Dartmouth College in New Hampshire. One of the reasons why I chose Dartmouth is because they definitely had a very strong Native American student program, meaning a circle of students and a center where I knew I could go if I needed something, whether that's somebody that looked like me or a guidance counselor that looked like me to help me work through things. That was one of the reasons why I chose that school.

Probably in the end of August, I got a letter from this Indian Health Service Scholarship saying, "We've awarded you the scholarship." I said, "Well, I'm going to Dartmouth now. I'm not going to TCU," but they said, "Well, we only can give you the money for what we allocated for TCU." At that point I figured, I'll just go to TCU. It's close by. When I decided to go to Dartmouth, I bought my plane ticket already for the fall semester and to get there, it was probably two planes, three planes maybe just to get to Hanover. I remember asking my mom and dad, "Hey, so are you going to buy my ticket for Thanksgiving and Christmas?" And they're like, "No, you're not coming home for those days. Do you know how much it is to fly out there?" So I think that kind of helped me decide, "Hey, TCU is a little closer," and I'll have more money because I have three scholarships now.

So that's how I came to TCU in fall of 1994. I called Dr. Larry Adams. I said, "Hi Larry, I decided to come to TCU." He called somebody since school had already started at TCU, and I was able to enroll into most of the classes I needed as a pre-med major. My mom and I booked a flight,

and we were off to TCU with the big black trunk full of stuff. I remember my mom and I pulling up in a taxi, getting off, unloading my things in front of Shelby Hall. Larry Adams had somebody pick us up and drove us around to the stores to get things like a TV, phone, refrigerator, and microwave. I didn't come from an affluent family, but what I do know is my grandfather had sheep, cows, horses, and so did my dad. They raised them, they sold them, and made a living off of being ranchers. I even got to go on the exchange program to Paris, France when I was in 10th grade because my dad and my grandpa sold their cattle and gave me a \$2,000 check. So somehow they made a living off being ranchers and my dad worked a full-time job too. My grandpa even bought me a red Honda Prelude with a sunroof while I was in college and I cherished that car. I have no idea how they made that money off of a ranch, but it was what helped support my family and my ability to go to college.



Tabitha Tan's graduation day from TCU on May 13, 1999: left-to-right, Ray Tan (father), Tabitha, Maggie Slowman-Brown (mother), and Troy Brown (brother).

One of the things I always think about and am grateful for is that I'm a first-generation college student. I know my mother's story. I know both my grandmothers' stories, and I know both my great-grandmother's stories of how they got to where we're at. So I think about all that, and I reflect on the progression over time, because those women were definitely very strong willed, determined and resilient.

So my maternal great-grandmother, she was given an English name, Mary Slowman from Teecnospos, Arizona. Her Navajo name, Dezbah, means "prepare for war," I guess, in a sense, like she's fire. She lived to be over one hundred years old. She was a sheep herder, and she was also a Navajo weaver. A lot of her rugs are out there somewhere being sold, but I do have three or four of them that I cherish.

Then, there's my paternal great-grandmother, who also I've met, her name is Yit'sidíí Bidá'í Bitsí', and that means the silversmith's daughter. She was really the inspiration for me to go into environmental science. She was a medicine woman too, who used herbs to heal people. You would go in her house, and she'd have tons of herbs lined up in clear glass mason jars on her window seal and shelves. If you said your ear hurts, she knew something to mix up to make sure that went away. She had the cure for acne. She had the cure for pain in your back. She definitely influenced me in that sense, and maybe that's the scientist side of me. And then she was six foot tall, go figure. She was married to my great-grandfather, Joe Tan, who was a medicine man, in Oaksprings, Arizona. He was half San Juan Paiute and half Navajo. His Navajo name was Báyóodzin Begaye, which means the Paiute Indian man. My dad also told me my great-great grandfather was full San Juan Paiute who was a true warrior.

Then, there's my maternal grandmother, her name is Etta Slowman from Teecnospos, Arizona. She was very well-educated. She spoke English, she knew how to drive and she worked full-time at a hotel close to Mesa Verde which was a popular tourist location in Cortez, Colorado.

Then, my paternal grandmother, who I was closest to of all my grandmothers, her name was Elsie Tan from Red Valley, Arizona. She was a weaver, a sheep herder, and a homemaker. She's the one who pretty much raised me alongside my grandfather and my aunties. My parents were young when they had me and she wanted to make sure not only I, but my other cousins were taken care of. She actually let my parents go off to college and go work out of town while I was growing up, and I always loved it when we would go see my parents. She didn't speak English or drive, but she knew that I always had to do my homework, read my books and sign my permission slips. I'd actually translated for her and my grandpa or even counted money for them when we would go shopping, and there's one time I took them all the way to the "big city," Albuquerque, using my English/Navajo skills so they can go shopping for a truck.

All these women definitely were the matriarchs of our family, the Naabeehó sáanii (Navajo women) are the center of the family, the family decision makers, family protectors, outspoken, full of wisdom, determined, and motivated. Both of my grandmothers had nine kids and one of them, the one that helped raise me, Elsie, she had an arranged marriage to my grandfather, Sam Joe Tan from Sheepsprings, Arizona. My paternal great-grandfather was a medicine man, so it was kind of like, "Hey, the medicine man wants you to marry his son." So, when they tell their stories, she just rose to the occasion and married a man she didn't

know and probably didn't care for and learned to love him while raising nine kids. She always had this smile on her face when she would tell me the story of how she met my grandfather.

Definitely, they were matriarchs, meaning that they really were the leaders of the family—had kids, raised kids, raised grandkids. I think that's where I kind of get my leadership from, my outspokenness, my determination, which my brothers say all the time. In the Navajo culture, from a clan perspective, the woman is the lead. When you say your clan—my clan is Naasht'ézhi Tódik'Qzhi Dine'é —I'm saying my mother's clan first because she's the lead. That's who I am. That's my root. So when you go to my mom, my mom's mom and her mom, we all have the same clan. We're all from the same lineage, and that's number one. Then, your father's clan comes second. I think that's indicative of the matriarchal society within the Navajo culture.

My mom, Maggie Slowman-Brown was raised by a strong woman. She lost her dad when she was six. My grandmother, her mom, was left with nine kids and no husband to help her raise these kids. So she educated herself. She got herself a job. She raised all these nine kids. She really was hardcore. She was no holds barred. I was scared of that grandma. She wasn't going to sneak you candy like my other grandma did—again, going back to the resilience thing, right? She definitely was. She definitely did not show emotion. She was tough towards me, but she loved my brothers.

I think because of that and how my mom was raised, made my mom a very strong woman, and she did educate herself too. She did go to college, didn't get quite get her degree, but exposed herself to education, the city life and was very well-spoken. We were having a Peyote meeting one time at my grandma's house. The medicine man said, "Hey, who's that

White lady in the teepee?" And it was my mom. My mom definitely didn't look Navajo. She was very fair skinned, light, kind of reddish hair, beautiful, spoke very well English and Navajo and carried herself very well. Not that Navajo women don't, it's just that she just stood out like that, and I think part of that, too, was just that she could function in the other world and in the Navajo world. But she definitely was a matriarch of her family. After my grandmother and my great-grandmother got older, my mother stepped in and became literally the leader of that side of the family. I think that is indicative of my mom.

My great-grandmother on my mom's side, this is Mary Slowman, or Dezbah, she wove these two beautiful red rugs with black patterns made from 100% wool, and then she sewed them together to make a traditional Navajo rug dress known as the Bííl. They are worn in celebration when a woman has accomplished a great milestone in life or may be worn for special occasions and were worn historically during the winter and prior to the Long Walk. That's probably almost a seventy-year-old rug dress. My mom's sister keeps it, and she loans it out to family members who want to use it, but you have to give it back since it's a very valuable family heirloom. Yeah, that's a true Navajo rug dress. I mean, it's heavy. It's hot. I have no idea how women wore that a long time ago, but it keeps you warm in the wintertime for sure.

I think if I get my strength and my resilience from anywhere, it's really from those line of women because I know my grandmothers don't play. So that just kind of stuck in the back of my head. My grandma prayed for me, did a prayer over me before I left, and both grandmas covered me with cedar, covered me with corn pollen, and feathered me down. And I thought, "Okay, this is something I have to do. This is not an option for me." All the sacrifices they made for me, I got to finish this. I'm just a

competitive person anyway. And growing up—obviously, I grew up on the reservation—sometimes you don't have water, sometimes you don't have electricity. But somehow, we made it, and somehow we survived it, and we never went hungry. I knew, "I have the survival skills because of them. If they can survive that life and still get here, I can survive this college life on a scholarship and have TCU fully paid, then I think I'm going to be okay. Obviously, there's a reason why I got here, and there's a reason why I need to stay, and I need to finish this." So, literally, that went through my whole mind, probably that whole first week at TCU.

Experiences at TCU

Being at TCU, I didn't feel like I struggled, because I was able to talk to my family since they paid for my phone. I had a cell phone and a pager, and somehow they made it happen. Maybe for them, it was like, "Okay, she's out in the White man's world and she's going to survive it, so we're going to help her do it." It literally was a family effort for me to be at TCU. It was just not me. It was just not my parents. It literally was my whole tribe that did everything to make sure that I was at TCU and that I stayed there. So if it meant they all chipped in to get me a cell phone so I can call home, that's what it meant. That's why my family is so important to me, and I am very close to my family. I'm talking down to my cousin's kids who are in elementary school, that's three generations apart and I'm close to those kids. I think it's really this lineage of women or just my family in general, that means the world to me. One way or another they made it happen for me.

When I got there, I think I was in culture shock, but I had gone to Albuquerque Academy for my freshman and sophomore years. So I was familiar with other cultures, but when I was at TCU, I didn't see other

people who looked like me. I think it kind of started to sink in. At the same time, I had two other Navajo friends. We had all visited TCU together our senior year and they decided to go to TCU, so they were already on campus. And it wasn't the same for my two other friends who came. It wasn't the same for them. They struggled a lot with just the environment, meaning the non-Native people because obviously 99.9% of our high school was Navajo, and if you were White or if you were Black, you knew who that family was.

I think when I knew that I was different—when I say I was different, meaning I look different, I probably sounded different at the time—is when we had bought all the stuff for my dorm room, and I was in Shelby Hall. When I first met my roommate from Ada, Oklahoma. She was very surprised at what my mom had bought which was all set up in the room, like the microwave, the phone, because she didn't bring any of that with her. I just happened to watch movies and knew that "Hey, if I want to be cool, I want a cool dorm room. I know this is what I need to have." I think I've told the story before. She said, "Oh, you speak English?" And I thought to myself, "Yeah, we all speak English. I wouldn't be here if I didn't speak English." She told me that the RA had told her there's this Native American—at the time, "Indian" girl—that was coming to TCU off the reservation. They didn't know if I spoke English or still lived in tepees. My mom was with me. My mom was very vocal, very well-educated, and very in tune with the world off the reservation. So she was not very happy about that, at all. She was quite offended, and I think I didn't know any different, I guess. I didn't know what it meant at the time to me. If my mom was upset, obviously I was upset, too. So she ended up going to talk to Dr. Adams and the administration. We got an apology. I don't know if

they ever spoke to the RA or not, but during that time I just realized, "Okay, this is going to be different."

I didn't quite express it to my mom because I knew she would worry, but I just remember after all was said and done, I clearly remember when she was leaving. I remember this because I lost my mother when I was twenty-two and I will never forget this moment. So she looked at me and said, "Honey, I know you can do it. It's okay. It's scary, but it's okay. If there's anybody that I know that can do it, it's you." And I remember she gave me a kiss on the cheek and a huge hug, she jumped into the taxi and went on her way to the airport. I think at the time, it's resilience that kicks in, right?

During my freshman year, TCU had this organizational fair in the main area of the student center, where they have all the tents outside and you can walk around and see what clubs or organizations you can join. One thing I knew that we did well back home was we played basketball. Our girls' high school were back-to-back state basketball champions in New Mexico. So I'm like, "Hey, maybe we do intramural sports." At this point, I think for me, it's really, like I mentioned, just survival, and figuring out, how do I survive this? And how do I make this better for myself, but also, for my friends, because I knew that they were struggling. They wanted to just stay in their rooms. I wanted to go out, eat in the Commons area, and meet new people.

So you just can hang out in front of Frog Fountain, and everybody is hanging out there. So I'm like, "Okay guys, maybe let's join intramural sports." For me, I did recognize people who looked like me. They weren't Navajo, but they were Brown with brown hair. So I'm like, "Okay, let me see what this is about." There's another freshman person we met named Carlos Alvarado, who's actually still my best friend to this day from TCU.

He saw us and started asking us questions. And there was an organization that he was a part of called Organization of Latin American Studies, OLAS. Although we told him we were not Hispanic or spoke Spanish, he still wanted us to come join the meeting to get to know other people like us. He was also a part of Frog Camp, so he met a lot of people. He was just a social person, so I kind of just gravitated towards him.



Robyn Mitchell (Diné and president of TCU's first Native American Student Association during the 1990s) and Carlos Alvarado, Tabitha Tan's best friend from TCU.

Then he introduced me to all the other Hispanic people, and that's how the three of us—the other two Navajo friends, Melissa and Roxanne—we all got introduced to the Hispanic sorority, Sigma Lambda Alpha. So I thought, "Okay, they all look like me," and they were so loving and caring. They knew that we were, I guess, "Indian" at the time, and they thought that was so cool. The chapter at TCU was the Beta Chapter, so they had just started. They were wanting to get as many girls as they can,

obviously—not to meet numbers, but just to learn about other cultures, too. They were very loving and very caring, and I thought, "Okay, so why not. They look like me, so let me just join them." And I pledged.

And then, my other two friends, they just stopped, and they ended up leaving TCU after their first semester. I lost my two best friends from high school, the women who I grew up with in Shiprock and even stayed friends with even when my family moved to Albuquerque. It was an adjustment, but just meant I had to be more resilient and maybe their experience at TCU probably wasn't the same as mine. I was sad when they left. I wasn't mad or upset because I knew how they felt. I say that because I had those same feelings when I went to Albuquerque Academy. When I went to Albuquerque Academy, the majority of the students were Caucasian students with sprinkles of Native American students. So I already knew that. For sure, the experience that I had at Albuquerque Academy, I think, was far worse for me than at TCU, and maybe that's why I knew what to do. When I got to TCU, it was uncomfortable, but I'm like, "Hey, I'm not going to go through what I went through again at Albuquerque Academy, so I'm going to make sure that I make it happen here at TCU."

They're still my best friends to this day. I think when you're not exposed to cultures outside, especially if you grew up on the reservation, it can be painful in the sense that you feel like sometimes you lose your identity. Because at home, you're speaking your language, you're eating your foods, your native foods, and you're surrounded by family. We grew up with our whole family. My grandma's house, everyone went there every evening. Then you go from having that to not having anything. That's really hard. So I think my friends were that for me, but when they left, I knew I had nothing. That feeling was definitely difficult.

When you get on campus, I guess you don't feel safe anymore. In the sense of not physical safety, but emotional safety, because you can't express yourself to somebody or somebody doesn't understand what you're having to deal with or what you're having to feel. That was very short. Again, resilience kicks in, you put on your big girl pants and you keep it going. And my mother was very good at helping me through a lot of that. And there's times she would just jump on the plane or in the car and come visit me. She just knew by the sound of my voice, if I called her and she heard something in my voice.

There's a time where I remember we were walking back from a class and my friends were like, "Is that your mom?" She was sitting right by the student center on the bench next to Frog Fountain with my grandma. I'm like, "Oh my God, how embarrassing," but I was so happy to see her. She just grabbed me and hugged me. My grandma was like, "I don't know, your mom said we're going for a drive, and next thing you know we're here." They stayed with me for a week because I had my own apartment. They cooked, they cleaned, we went shopping. My grandma did a blessing for me again, and this time she blessed my apartment. So it's things like that, made me feel like I was covered by blessings. You have people like my mom come and rescue me, just because of whatever she heard in my voice. Like I said, I don't have to say anything. She just hears my voice, and she knows. I guess that's just a mother's trait, but she was always in your business, too. I always joke around and say that I chose TCU because it was just far enough away to where my parents can't just show up, but it didn't matter to her. She still jumped in that car and drove twelve hours, and she wasn't stopping. Also, all of my life growing up, I've always been told, "Tabitha, you live in two worlds, the Navajo world and the White man's world," all the time. Whether it was my grandparents

or my parents, especially my dad. I felt like they knew how it was because of things that they've experienced, and they were trying to tell me, "Hey, we're preparing you because we don't want you to have those same feelings that we had." So I think I was prepared, but when you're by yourself and you're alone, kind of like a lone soldier, that definitely is a lot harder than if you had your friends or family who are from your hometown next to you.

At that time after my friends from Shiprock left, after the first semester, I kind of just gravitated towards my sorority and the OLAS organization. Most of my friends were Hispanic and I never grew up with Hispanics, but they embraced me and invited me to their homes. I had one friend, she lived in Laredo, TX and she had this ginormous home and invited fifteen of us during fall break. We all drove down there ate some good Mexican food, went shopping in Nuevo Laredo, and danced to Tejano and Spanish Rock music. So that's really how I survived in the beginning and just expanded on that. So with my sorority sisters and Carlos, they were sensitive to my experiences and were even more loving because of it, which I definitely am grateful for, because I don't think my experience wouldn't have been the same without them.

There was another organization called International Student Association, and they had an annual cultural event. They invited us to dress in our Native regalia and do a presentation or be a part of the fashion show at the time. I think people started to notice us, as Native Americans. Well, actually, we were known as the Shiprock girls, our hometown, because we played basketball and we did really well on the intramural basketball teams. So everyone would come and watch us play down in the Rickle. Everybody knew we were the Navajo girls. It just kind of grew on other people.



The "Shiprock Girls" (Diné) with members of the Organization of Latin American Students at the TCU-Baylor football game on October 1, 1994: Melissa Caddell, second from left, Tabitha Tan, third from left, and Robyn Mitchell, third from left.

People knew to come to us, to ask us questions about our culture or to be a part of the fashion show, which kind of led to starting that Native American student organization. The first time we did an event for Native American Heritage Month, we found local artists to come to TCU and I remember Harold Rogers as a Men's Fancy Dancer. I don't know if he remembers that—I remember his regalia. There were also another couple of females and kids that came, and there was a drum that came. These were events that were held in the Student Center as the students were walking by and you can share information with them or pass out a flyer. That's really kind of how the events were done. I mean, whether

that was the Native American event we had, or whether it was during Hispanic Heritage Month, Black History Month. I mean, that's really where a lot of us—I say us, minorities—had our events, but it's something you had to advertise for yourself.



Students from TCU's first Native American Student Association at the International Students Association's Annual Spring Banquet during the 1990s: Kathy Whitekiller (Cherokee), second from left, Robyn Mitchell (Diné), fourth from left, and Tabitha Tan (Diné), fifth from left. Native students participated in the Fashion Show and Talent Show.

That's kind of how the Native American student organization started, but it was really probably four of us—myself, Robyn Mitchell who is also from my hometown, Shiprock, and was a sophomore at TCU during that time, and there was another Navajo guy, Mike Charlie, also from my hometown who was a junior at the time. He was kind of like our big

brother when we came to TCU, and Robyn was kind of our big sister. I guess they kind of led the path for us. There was another lady, her name was Kathy [Kathleen Whitekiller]. She was Cherokee from Oklahoma and attended TCU for a year or two as a nursing student. Her experience may have been different, but we were able to connect on campus. We were all able to be in touch with our culture on campus, no matter what tribe we were from.



Robyn Mitchell (Diné) and Tabitha Tan (Diné) at the International Students Association's Annual Spring Banquet during the 1990s.

We started the student group for awareness. I just believe in educating others. I think what sparked that, too, is being asked about being Indian and if I knew how to speak English or if I still lived in tepees. Having a lot of different questions being asked of me that you think would be basic. I thought, let's see what we can do to educate the community, in this case TCU. I think the other thing is I felt at the time, you kind of feel exotic. People are like, "Oh, you're Indian." Then the fact that we grew up on the reservation, people think that you're 100%, that you're "real." We've never really met somebody who's both parents are 100% based on our CIB [Certificate of Degree of Indian or Alaska Native Blood]. For me or for us, it was really, "Let's just educate them and teach." That was really our goal. I think when people think Indian or Native American, the first thing they think about is powwow, the drum, flute music and what you see on TV like *Dances with Wolves* or I don't know, all these other movies that you see. So it's kind of like, "Okay, let's start them with this."

And then, we go and do other things too, which in this case was really working with some of the younger kids at one of the schools there at TCU. I think after a while it was only maybe two of us that were left because Robyn graduated, Mike graduated, and it was just me and maybe Kathy. That's when it just dissipated after that [after 1996]. We weren't able to sustain it because of the numbers of Native American students were not present or at least we didn't know if they were being accounted for. There was really nobody else. Again, I mean, it was a good start, and we really enjoyed what we did at the time.

I think the knowledge at TCU about Native Americans was, I would say from a scale of one to five, probably one and we maybe moved to a two or three. Again, it's really what you see on TV, right? And this is

also for me, I didn't realize there were reservations in Texas. I knew there were reservations in Oklahoma. You have Native Americans in Oklahoma who are Cherokee or those other tribes in Oklahoma, but they don't exactly look like me. There were probably Native students who were Native or part Native, but they weren't going to be open like, "Hey, I'm Native American," because they had blonde hair and blue eyes. When people started to feel comfortable, then they would come out and say, "Hey, I'm Native too." They would start talking about their grandparents or even sometimes knew the language. I don't feel like it was an environment where if you had blonde hair and blue eyes, you were open to saying, "Hey, I'm Native," because obviously, that may be looked at a little differently. To everybody, I was Hispanic, I was the Mexican girl from New Mexico.

Growing up, Navajo was my first language. The way it's been explained to me from my family is you have the Navajo culture and then you have the Native American Church and then you have Christianity. My family was very different. My mom's family was Native American Church. That means they're having Native American Church ceremonies, eating peyote, drinking peyote, praying to, I mean, both my grandmothers would debate this all the time, whoever is up there. My great-grandfather was a medicine man on my paternal side, so my dad's family was very respectful of him in that, seeing that that's the Navajo culture. He practiced the Navajo culture and then you bring in Christianity into that. So they kind of functioned with that. So I think growing up—I explained that story because growing up, I just went whichever way my parents went. If I was with my mom, I did Native American Church. When I was with my dad and his family, it was church with the medicine man. So one of the things I personally chose is to respect both sides of my family.

Coming to TCU, I got blessed with the corn pollen, the cedar and the feathering down and even have a ceremony before I would leave for college. Then, on the Christian and the Navajo side, I have my great-grandfather, Joe Tan (Báyóodzin Begaye), the medicine man, doing a ceremony for me in Hózhójí, meaning the Blessingway, to Walk in Beauty Ceremony. And then my grandma Elsie, praying for me while putting olive oil on my forehead. Everybody in my family was blessing me all sorts of ways before I left for college, but when I got to college, I didn't do any of it because I think for me, I was always afraid—I don't know why, now that I think about it—of what people would think of me feathering myself down or taking corn pollen or even sitting in prayer with the Bible. It was a Christian college, and I've seen other people do it. During my freshman year, my roommate's father was a pastor of a Lutheran church. So, she always had her Bible out, did Bible study, and I just never did. I just didn't know which way to go at the time. And I just didn't want to be looked at as, "Oh, she's eating some corn pollen" and has these feathers with her. Is it witchcraft or is it juju, because anybody can interpret some of those things differently. So I just chose not to do it. If I did it, I did it in silence. It was more that I just would rather not do it than have somebody see me do that and say, "Oh, well, she's doing something in the room with her feathers." So I just didn't do it out in the open.

Larry Adams was very vocal about him being Native American and obviously, in his position [Associate Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs] at the time, it's very well-respected where he was. And the fact that he supported us, whether or not that was, "Hey, if we needed help with something." I think from that perspective, maybe there was more sensitivity because if you're affiliated with him as somebody at that level in the administration, I feel like that was more helpful. I think for us, I was

happy we had that access. I think the relationships that we also built with our professors and our advisors were also very helpful. My advisor was Dr. [Leo] Newland, and he respected my culture and where I came from and was very sensitive to the differences of how I grew up. The other person was in the Geology Department, [Nowell] Donovan. He loved Robyn Mitchell. He was her advisor because she was a geology major. He was very caring to her and her family and then, that was extended to us, too. Holidays, if we weren't going home, we would get invites to some of the professors' homes and introduced to their families. So I think the sensitivity from that perspective was tremendous and was very helpful to us. If it wasn't a student, at least we have a professor or advisors on our side to understand our background and our struggles when it comes to being on campus. I think the other thing is the Geology professors knew the history of the geological aspects my hometown, Shiprock. Shiprock, also known as Tse' Bit' A'i, meaning "rock with wings" is a volcanic rock in my hometown. Being in geology and environmental science classes, this was an area that they had interest in already, and they've already studied it and researched it which we thought was cool at the time as we, being from Shiprock did not know the geological aspects of the area. So them knowing we were from there, it just kind of worked out for us.

Classes addressing Native American issues or perspectives were almost non-existent. TCU is in its own little bubble, right? I don't think even that was on anyone's agenda or anyone's thoughts. I don't even remember a book in English class, even in a religion class. For example, you had to take World Religions or you had to take the Bible class. I didn't take those two classes, so I had to take another 300-level class. The only class I was able to take at that time was an Islam religion class. Even that class was an option to take, but nowhere was there any Native American,

American Indian or anything like that as a part of any discussion in any class that I am aware of.

As far as staying connected with family or just missing home, with the scholarships I had, I had extra money that allowed me to buy a plane ticket home if I got homesick. That extra money that I had really was a lifesaver. I know that my family probably couldn't have done that financially every single time I wanted to buy a plane ticket. I may have gone home a lot since my family would ask, "Do you even still go to college?" I went home quite a bit and eventually my parents would say, "You have to stay there sometimes. You have to." There were other students, such as Kathy who was Cherokee, drove back to Oklahoma every weekend. She never stayed on campus—only for classes. And she was out the door the minute her last class was done on Friday and was back to Oklahoma. She drove in Monday mornings and went to class. I didn't have the luxury, but I knew that, hey, if I had some money, I was going to jump on that plane on Friday afternoon, and I was back at DFW or Love Field on Sunday evening. And I think that happened more often than not, to help with that homesickness.

I think loneliness was a feeling I had at times because no one can relate to you, or I felt like I was missing out on things like birthday parties or celebrations with family. And I wanted to be there because I was very close to my family. Even now, I went home for a graduation and then, I went home for a baby shower two weeks later. So even at this age, I still am the same way, but I think that keeps me grounded and it keeps me in tune with where I come from. I feel like that was really, really my saving grace, I guess. Now, this is what, twenty-five years later since I came to the DFW area in 1994, I still go home just as much as I did when I was in college.

Going home, I was happy to be with my family, but also to see my friends. Even though my two friends left TCU, we still spent time together. We would drive from Fort Worth back to our hometown together during the holidays. Going home to see family or friends, I know I was 100% sad, but I never cried. Because at the time, I kept telling myself, "You're not allowed to cry, Tabitha." Because when you leave, everyone is praying for you. I have a whole line of family members in front of me ready to bless me, pray for me, feather me down.

And it's like, "Okay, you can't cry," and I say that because it was hard not to. But when you're told not to cry, it's just unspoken, you just don't cry, you don't show fear and you stand in pride. I think that goes back to a cultural perspective for Navajo women in general. You're the matriarch, you're the leader, you don't falter, you stand your ground or you resist or you—what is that word I used earlier? Resilience kicks in. But believe me, there were a lot of times when my dad dropped me off at the airport and I wanted to cry. That definitely was very hard to not be able to express your emotions. I think in the Navajo culture, you just don't. Now, it's a little different because back then, you had to be strong, you can't show your weakness. I will say there's not a time I've ever seen people cry, like leaving at the airport, unless there was a death in the family. It's almost one of those things, an emotion you don't show, I guess. That's probably not good, especially at that age. Even now, I teach my niece, it's okay. It's okay to express emotion. I even have a feeling wheel which helps label my emotions or whatever I'm experiencing at a specific time. It's not easy for me to express my feelings at times. It's just one of those things where maybe if I did it in the past, I wouldn't have to have that feeling wheel in front of me now. Not to say nobody ever told

me, don't cry. It's just one of those things you just don't see anybody doing, so you just didn't do it.

What stood out to me the most in how I changed at TCU is knowing how to function off the reservation. I think I mastered that. So I think that also prepared me in a sense for the real world, after TCU. It also helped me know how to help others who come after me, meaning my cousins' kids, my cousins' friends, and anyone who may want to go to college. Because it's not the same, meaning that I feel like kids today aren't as resilient and for those who are, I try to share my story with them so they know it will be okay. Let's use my niece, Moné as an example. By showing her the way, the challenges that I faced, she can use that to her advantage and she can also help the next generation that's coming after her.

So there's less stories of having the hurt or the pain or the missing home and more of the success—of how do I pivot and how do I adjust to this environment? Because I'll be honest, I don't feel like the reservation has changed since I was there. It's still the same. The only difference I think is you have a McDonald's now, you have a Sonic, you have streetlights, but other than that, it's the same. Maybe the school system has advanced just a little more, but I will say that I feel like my time at TCU has helped me be better prepared for life as an adult and even for my first “real job.” Recently, my cousin told her daughter, “I don't think you should go to college because it's in Seattle. It's far. I'm not going to be able to see you, and how am I going to get to you?” Obviously, her daughter had to listen to her mom. I inserted myself and had a conversation with my cousin. She's my older cousin, Jeri. My first question to her was, “Why are you holding her back?” She has potential to get a full wrestling scholarship, so I said, “Let me tell you what, why don't I

take her up there? Let me talk to her coach. I'll fly up there with her. Let's just see what happens. She may like this. She may not. She may get homesick. I don't know. Let's just see.” So, we went up there. My cousin ended up coming with me, and my goddaughter ended up loving it. They offered her a wrestling scholarship. I negotiated with the coach for room and board, and she ended up going to college in Seattle and wrestling for a Division II women's wrestling team. In March, my goddaughter went to the national championship in Puerto Rico and took second place as a freshman female wrestler in her weight division. My cousin also took her other kids, and they all flew out to Puerto Rico for the championship. I couldn't go, and I really wanted to go, but I said, “Hey, this is your time. You got to do this. This is your daughter.” So that's just kind of an example of knowing what the struggles were during my years at TCU and adjusting. I was able to share that with my cousin and her daughter. Her daughter loves it. She can't wait to go back. I just saw her last weekend when I was at home and she's like, “I can't wait to go back. I need to get out of here.” I feel like that's the benefit. If I can have endured all this through my college years and those who come after me, do not, then I'm okay with that.

It's difficult to go back to the reservation. I used to go all the time to visit my grandmother, Elsie, but since she's passed on about two years ago, the only reason why I go there to Shiprock or the Rez is to get a roast mutton sandwich or a Navajo taco and to see my aunts and my cousins who still live there. Outside of that, I make sure I get there first thing in the morning, and I leave before it gets dark. I think it's hard to see that. It's hard to see that the progress is very minimal. And I have these discussions with my dad all the time. I'm like, “Why? Why?” I think part of it is—I'm only speaking for myself, and what I've seen my family—you

get content and sometimes you don't know what else is off the reservation, or you only know what's in a border town. Meaning, for us, Shiprock is my hometown. The border town is Farmington. Sometimes people don't see outside of that. So when I'm talking about my cousin, Jeri, she's forty-nine years old and just recently flew on a plane in 2022 to Seattle. She's never been anywhere, outside of the US, and now I told her, "You're in Puerto Rico!" So that's really hard for me to see, and I guess sometimes I feel like, this Navajo scholarship helped me get to where I'm at. Can I go back and help my people? Yes, but I feel you have to change the mindset. You have to change, and I say this with my own family, too, because I feel like we've always been given things. Maybe we just gotten used to it and we become complacent with it.

Advice to TCU

As an alum, I am a Horned Frog [TCU's mascot] for life. I bleed purple [a phrase conveying loyalty to TCU's school color]. My experience at TCU was a little different, and I learned a lot. I'm definitely very grateful for Dr. Newland and the advising there. Also, as an alum, just the transition that TCU has made from 1994 to 2023, which is almost twenty-nine years later, in my mind, it's great—it's phenomenal. Although it took a long time, I think having the Land Acknowledgement, and even the scholarships, is definitely showing respect, as it states, to acknowledge all Native American peoples who have lived on this land, where TCU now stands. I definitely am grateful for that because I think not all colleges have done that. Not all businesses have done that. I think the fact that they're open to conversation and have recognized their role in the process, meaning TCU recognized that, "Hey, we are on Native land." Did anybody ever bring that to their attention? Did they even know? I didn't know. I think

as an alum, I'm definitely appreciative that they have recognized that we are here, that we exist, and that the land that the beautiful campus is on was once land of Native Americans. And that is great and no wonder I felt at home surrounded by my ancestors. Can they do a little more? Absolutely.



Luci Tapahonso (right), inaugural poet laureate of the Navajo Nation and keynote speaker at TCU's third annual Native American and Indigenous Peoples Day Symposium, poses with Tabitha Tan (left) at a Horned Frog statue, October 1, 2018.

The scholarship aspect is where I would say that because TCU is very expensive. And there's no comparison to someone coming off of the

reservation and being able to afford TCU and for TCU to think, "Oh, well we want more Native Americans." When you're wanting to recruit Native Americans, say from the reservation or near the reservation, there's no way they can afford TCU. And not even the tribes that provide the scholarships would be able to pay for TCU. So, for example, the Manuelito Scholarship is an academic scholarship, I was awarded by the Navajo Nation, however, it would not cover TCU's tuition today. I hear it's still the same amount as when I first got it. We're in 2023, and that's going to cover nothing if the prices of the university tuition have increased by ten since then, right? Well, I say that because my niece has been researching the current amount of the Manuelito Scholarship and it's still the same amount. So I think in that sense, I think a little more work could be done in that area.

In the future, I would still like to see the Land Acknowledgement at sporting events and at each of TCU's Colleges and for TCU to continue student recruitment on/off the reservation. And again, I think for me, it's the scholarships and the availability of financial aid to Native students I would like to see. I think that would be key for me. I would like to see more of that, but also, understanding the culture. I know we've kind of started with the Native Studies program, but I think also introducing a little more of that for awareness and education for me would be key, because I still feel like TCU is still in its bubble. When I say TCU, I mean also the students. Something else that would also be very helpful in the sense of just relationships when a Native student comes to TCU would be being able to have somewhere to go or someone to turn to who looked like me to help me work through things. I think when I was there, the person that was that for us as minority students was Darron Turner. He was that person for us. He just didn't accommodate the Black students.

He accommodated all of us people, the students of color, that were at TCU at that time.