

Peterson Zah Graduation Tour 2006: Observations from a Navajo Parent

Watching your child graduate from high school or witnessing the transformation of a preteen into that vulnerable period known as adolescence is probably the first and most poignant occasion in a parent-child relationship. Your child has officially reached a goal in which they themselves can see the fruit of their academic labours, a diploma. The pride and hope that fills each parent is overwhelmingly evident. Needless to say, they only want the best of every experience to befall their child. They want them to succeed in life.

Up to this point, family has been the primary support system for their student and now they must entrust some of that support and guidance to the overseers of their child's collegiate or military endeavors. No one is happier or more serious about taking that trust and guiding their child toward a successful future than Dr. Peterson Zah, Arizona State University's Advisor to the President on American Indian Affairs.

I recently had the opportunity to travel along with Mr. Zah in an effort to "capture" some of what I've observed as an audience member and a mother of a soon to be graduate.

While Mr. Zah continues to garner respect from a nation that he once led, he now gains the same trust and respect from a new, younger audience of educators, community members, parents, and students. This is the reason, I believe, he is sought after by many schools throughout the reservation during this 2006 graduation season. Whether they invite him as a guest speaker or keynote speaker, it's clear, they want to hear his words of wisdom.

In Tuba City Arizona, to a senior high class of about one hundred students, he tells them that they are at a "crucial crossroads" and that they are faced with many options that may include the military, trade school, or college. While he did not say that one was more important or better than the other, he elaborated on the latter. He acknowledged the importance and pride of protecting our freedoms in the military and encouraged others to be "apart of the elite group, the decision makers of our communities". He goes on to describe the excitement and satisfaction of using your creativity to be innovative. "By possessing these basic attributes, the possibilities are endless; be honest to yourself and others, keep yourself in good health, be kind, caring, and help when you can". With that said, he announced his invitation. "We would like to have you at Arizona State University, take you in as our own and see you graduate!" He recognized the hardships of city life, let alone adapting to a university environment. He knows first hand and has witnessed how the responsibilities can be overwhelming for a Native American student coming fresh off of the reservation.

His pledge to support and guide these young people toward a successful completion is confirmed when he produces the number of Navajos that are enrolled and those that have graduated since his appointment by the President of A.S.U.

Near his home community of Low Mountain Arizona, he congratulated the Pinon high school class of 2006, praised their state of the art facility, applauded the basketball teams' state victory, and challenged the school board and faculty to raise their academic standards. He likened the raising and letting go of a child to a baby eaglets, when they are taken up so high to a point where they must let go and hope that it flies by itself. "Like this eagle, you will be free to go on your own after high school". Their parents could not have agreed more. Dr. Zah makes it clear that only those who stop relying on their parents to say and do all the legwork for college entrance will succeed. He wants to hear the student speak for him or herself when they come to A.S.U.

At a junior high school promotion program, he focused on how their decisions concerning drugs can tremendously affect them in high school and beyond. By raising the issue of how "meth" and alcohol have plagued even our smallest and most remote communities he touched a nerve among the students, parents, and grandparents. The community sees the negative affects everyday and they were grateful that someone cares enough to tell their children "just say no". They applauded in agreement that things must change for the better, for their future. Mr.Zah praised the young students for exhibiting their pride and knowledge of their clans. This was a perfect example of "know yourself, know your clan." He re-iterates that knowing yourself and respecting yourself, elders, and your traditions will keep you strong enough to handle what life brings your way. It also puts you in a better position to go onto college and succeed.

It has been a pleasure to observe Dr.Zah address one-hundred and ninety-seven young adults, their parents, school board faculties, and their community members. As an audience member I witnessed and heard the sincere emotion and passion for education that he expresses in motivating our youth to do better, go beyond, and live in harmony. Although, he was most likely invited for who he is and for what he has accomplished for the Navajo Nation as a leader, it is his true integrity that unwittingly shines through.

By: Shannon Parrish (Navajo), Graduation Audience Member
June 2006

**Peterson Zah Itinerary
Graduation Tour 2006**

Tonealea School

Thursday, May 18, 2006

10 AM

Guest Speaker

Dr. Peterson Zah

Jr. High Graduation/ High School (call Pete)

Two Grey Hills High School Graduation

Tuba City, AZ

Friday, May 19, 2006

1 PM

Location, can't miss it he says gym or auditorium (follow the crowd)

Keynote Speaker

Dr. Peterson Zah

Tsaile Middle School

Tsaile, AZ

Friday, May 26, 2006

10 AM

Keynote Speaker

Dr. Peterson Zah

(at the middle school)

Window Rock Community School

Friday, May 26, 2006

3 PM

Class Room Speaker

(High School Students some parents may be present)

Pinon High School Graduation

Pinon, AZ

Saturday, May 27, 2006

10 AM

Dr. Keynote Speaker

Peterson Zah