

# Discovering the riches of simple living:

## Collin grad gives back to the Navajo Nation

**A**S A YOUNG GIRL, Stephanie Hall took a trip to visit friends in the city. She stood in amazement as a child flipped a switch and turned a handle—light and water suddenly appeared. The extreme contrast to her life experiences made it apparent to Hall that she was growing up in an impoverished community. It took years for her to fully appreciate the richness of her heritage, but it only took one college to elucidate the significant role she could play in improving the plight of her beloved people.

Hall grew up on a Navajo reservation in Leupp, Arizona. Well acquainted with the value of elbow grease, she scrubbed her clothes on a washboard, immersed in a five-foot, metal tub. Her family toiled in the field to bring corn, squash and tomatoes to the table, and their meat came from the sheep and cattle that grazed on their land.

Hall's mother, a social worker, made the decision to raise her children on the reservation and care for her aging mother. Each weekend, Hall's father, commuted to an aerospace engineering firm in Phoenix.

"It is hard, but it is a common story because there are so few jobs on the reservation. I was too young to understand the socioeconomic dynamic and didn't appreciate going back until later," Hall said.

### Venturing out to see the world

Hall left her family to serve in the military as a sergeant and photojournalist. Ironically, more than

7,000 miles from the reservation, she felt as though she was home.

"It was interesting to step foot in Afghanistan because it is similar to where I grew up. There is no development, little infrastructure, high violence, and lots of unsupervised kids running around," Hall said.

After serving in the military, Hall enrolled in Collin College. She took an honors course and learned about the United Nations and their involvement with indigenous sites. She also discovered that some countries, such as Canada, voted against giving rights to indigenous people.



*Stephanie Hall graduated from Collin College and earned a bachelor's degree from SMU.*

"Dr. Kay Mizell got me thinking about indigenous people and how we think of ourselves. When I was growing up I didn't have an appreciation of my community and how I could fit into it. When you can identify

what is wrong, you can begin thinking of how to fix it," Hall said.

While she was attending classes at Collin, Hall was selected to join the Phi Theta Kappa (PTK) honor society. Serving others was something she understood as a child, but she learned how a group of service-oriented people could work together in PTK.

"PTK gave me hope. Students today are so service oriented and put people first. It is beautiful. PTK defined what I wanted to do in my life—be a leader in my Native American community," Hall said.

"I cannot imagine how my life would have turned out if I didn't attend Collin College. Based on academics and PTK at Collin, I received a half-tuition

scholarship for Southern Methodist University (SMU), and then I received other scholarships for a total of 75 percent. Most of my friends are students from Collin. At Collin, I met professors and administrators that were concerned about the students and the impact the institution had on these students. I met the president, Cary Israel. He always encourages students to find out how they can improve themselves and the community."

After graduating from Collin, Hall earned a bachelor's degree in cultural anthropology at SMU, and through a partnership with the University of Arizona learned even more about her own culture.

Today, Hall is living on the Navajo reservation in her childhood home, which now has electricity but still lacks running water.

"I take a certain amount of pride in the fact that we don't have running water. I understand the drought and how valuable water is. It is the traditional Navajo way of thinking to live minimally, so you don't have that much of an impact on the environment around you."

Hall gave up a higher paying job with benefits to serve her people as the youth development program manager for the private, nonprofit organization Tó Láni Enterprises. She explains that "Tó" means "water" and "Láni" means "a lot of." The name reflects the fact that the Navajos appreciate the abundant water supply they have. Hall explains that her job is to encourage and motivate young people to be more involved in their community and to make elders more aware of the youths' way of thinking. Her job is more daunting than it sounds.

"Recently, one young person killed another on the reservation. We have a 44 percent high school dropout rate. What is even more shocking is that of Navajos over the age of 25 only seven percent hold a college degree. We want our young to go to college if they choose it," she said with conviction.

Hall sits on the board for the North Leupp Family Farms, a Navajo managed nonprofit, and the Community Land Use Planning Community for the Leupp Chapter, which plans business




development, leases, and home sites. She is also managing The Little Colorado River Youth Development Institute, an arm of Tó Lání Enterprises. Her organization embraces innovation, and she is proud of the fact that the U.S. Department of Agriculture, through a Conservation Innovation Grant, provided the funding for a first-of-its-kind, pilot solar irrigation project. The reservation now has a solar water pump with solar panels that move with the sun.

### **Past and present collide**

While Hall embraces the traditional Navajo concept of living in the moment, she dreams of a brighter future for the youth in her community. A warm smile changes the contours of her face as she remembers leaving the house at dawn with her siblings and cousins to play hide and seek among the giant, three-story, red-boulder rock formations, running from a wild cow, and bushwhacking through the 8- to 10-foot tall tamarisks to play along the sand dunes of the Little Colorado River. She dreams of young Navajos who embrace imagination, culture, and academic opportunities and who are proud of who they are and where they come from.

“I chose this path because it is something I believe in 100 percent. We can make change in our community. Five years down the road, I want to step outside of the building and see rural gardens, a multicultural art center, and people enjoying summer evenings. I want to create a place where people feel safe to assemble and enjoy each other’s company. I hope that through this organization patches of hope will spring up. It is only through hope that our community will rebuild itself and prosper,” Hall said.

For more information about honors classes at Collin College visit [collin.edu/academics/honors/](http://collin.edu/academics/honors/). For more information about Tó Lání Enterprises, visit [tolanilake.org](http://tolanilake.org). 

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