Native Studies director oversees unique, growing cultural center

By Tom Pfingsten  2:52 p.m Jan. 19, 2014

SAN MARCOS — When Joely Proudfit says she’s at home on campus, she doesn’t mean it like the others do.

A descendant of Luiseño Indians, Proudfit is one of the few people who can step out the door, survey the hills and say that her people have always dwelled in this region.

Now that she is director of the California Indian Culture and Sovereignty Center at Cal State San Marcos, she has immersed herself in the cause of several dozen local tribes, whose students have boosted the rolls here in record numbers.

To Proudfit — who was the first in her family to graduate high school, let alone earn a Ph.D. — the center was long overdue on the grounds of North County’s only university.

“We’re still trying to verify the numbers for the spring, but if the numbers are going in the direction that we think, we should have the highest American Indian student population of any institution in the state — CSU or UC,” she told me. “We have 18 tribes in our county; we should be the premier institution for American Indian studies.”

Proudfit arrived at Cal State San Marcos in fall 2008, having taught all over California with a constant yearning to return to North County.

Her first goal — a “dream,” she called it — was to persuade the university to approve the charter for the culture and sovereignty center, which happened in 2009.

Two years later, the doors opened, and I met Proudfit on Friday afternoon inside the center, on the first floor of a shiny new sociology building.

The last Friday before school started back up, it was quiet as she ushered me proudly from the Community Room to the conference room that she helped decorate, saving research money to buy the table and chairs when the center first opened.

From career training to cutting-edge research, the center’s work has earned support from at least one local tribe, the San Manuel Band of Mission Indians in San Bernardino County, and last November Proudfit’s staff hosted the inaugural San Diego American Indian Film Festival.

The festival fit right in with Proudfit’s favorite class, NATV 350, “Imagining Indians: American Indians, Mass Media, Film and Society,” in which she surveys the popular portrayal of Native Americans through the lens and on the page.

“This is a course I’ve been teaching for 20 years — I taught it at San Francisco State, I taught it at UCSD,” she explained. “What’s important, for American Indians, is that our whole image is driven by the way people define us — the stereotypes.”

To either side of Proudfit’s office are modest but attractive rooms where a grant writer, a tribal liaison and a researcher work, alongside six paid student employees.
Proudfit’s second duty at the university is to administer the small but growing Native Studies program, which she hopes to one day develop into a full-fledged department.

She has launched six courses here, and teaches one per semester. Meanwhile, the number of native students enrolled has grown to more than 300.

Across the freeway, Palomar College offers a wider range of classes in American Indian Studies, and Proudfit believes that North County, with its rich American Indian heritage, is positioned to become a hub of this kind of learning and research.

She is a friendly and welcoming woman, the type you would want to meet if you were feeling lost in the din and deadlines of a university campus. And she is thoughtful, taking a moment last week to calmly eviscerate Johnny Depp’s depiction of Tonto in “The Lone Ranger.”

But it was her background that I found most stirring: Moving from place to place around Southern California with her mother, Helen, Proudfit was not especially fond of her mom’s way of parting her straight hair right down the middle, enhancing her American Indian appearance.

“I wanted my mom to be Mrs. Brady,” she recalled. “I wanted to be like all the other kids, and it was very obvious that she was an Indian. We were Indian and that was it. Our culture was always at the forefront.”

She finished high school but hadn’t necessarily given much thought to higher education: “I went to college because I needed a place to live — a college recruiter came to my high school and told me about dorms. So I filled out the application.”

Almost 30 years later, Proudfit’s online biography brims with impressive acronyms and a staggering job history — she is the only professor she knows of to have been tenured three times — but it was the second sentence that caught my eye.

“Her maternal grandmothers are Lupe Grijalva Guerrero, Refugia Flores Grijalva Zuniga, Candelaria Flores and Juana Hapish,” it reads.

I asked Proudfit: Why all the grandmothers?

“As an Indian person, it’s always important to know who your people are and where you come from,” she said. “This is home. This is Luiseño land. It wasn’t until I was here that I had students from my same tribal community in my class. That is such a big deal, to be able to give back to your community.”

There’s belonging, and then there’s the kind of belonging that Proudfit has earned — in North County and in the classroom, truly at home in her corner office on a hillside that her grandmothers might have recognized.

“I’m here because of all of these other people who went before me,” she said. “You can’t get any more personal.”

Know anyone with an interesting job, history or outlook on life? Contact Tom Pfingsten at fallbrooktown@gmail.com

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