

SAN MARCOS: Cal State honors American Indian graduates

By By DEBORAH SULLIVAN BRENNAN dbrennan@nctimes.com 6:45 p.m. May 1, 2012



Cal State San Marcos honored two dozen graduating American Indian students at a ceremony Tuesday, celebrating the largest such group of students to graduate in the university's 21-year history.

While previous ceremonies have recognized four or five students, 24 will complete undergraduate or masters degrees this year, said Joely Proudfit, a CSUSM professor and director of the university's California Indian Culture and Sovereignty Center.

"My challenge for you today is to take your education with you everywhere you go," she told the students. "Do what you can do to make sure others have better opportunities than you have had."

The university has made a goal of increasing enrollment of American Indian students, Proudfit said, by reaching out to tribal schools, recruiting high school students from area tribes, and adding the center in November.

Those efforts, along with the American Indian Student Alliance, "gave students a home away from home," said graduating senior Tommy Cooper, business marketing major and member of the San Pasqual Band of Kumeyaay Indians.

Students who attended the ceremony with their families listened to remarks by university President Karen Haynes and other university and tribal officials, and received custom Pendleton wool stoles, which will identify them at commencement in May.

"Take joy in your success, celebrate this moment and give thanks to those who have helped you along the way," Haynes told the students, noting that only 12 percent of Native Americans have college degrees.

The ceremony Tuesday stressed hopes that the graduates will share the benefits of their education with their tribes, and serve as role models to younger students.

"We ask our brothers and sisters to take the knowledge they've gained, and bring it home to their tribes," said Christobal C. Devers Sr., of the Pauma Band of Luiseno Indians, in an opening blessing.

A group of fourth-graders from the Pechanga School in Temecula attended the event, along with students from the All Tribes Indian Charter School in Valley Center.

"The ceremony was amazing," said fourth-grader Rubi Rivera, 9. "To see all the tribes that are going to graduate inspires us to go to college."

Graduating students listed plans ranging from law school, a Ph.D. program, medical school and other graduate degrees, to working in social justice organizations and tribal government, or writing poetry and fiction.

"I hope to conduct research that will progress modern medicine and give back to my community," said Temet McMichael, who will attend a Ph.D. program in microbiology at Ohio State University.

Some also accepted eagle feathers from their families to mark their accomplishment.

The gift, said Johnny Bear Contreras, director of the interpretive center for the San Pasqual Indian Reservation, steels the recipient against the trials of life, by "recognizing that warrior spirit inside an individual, as we come up as men, as women As I look at you, look at all of you, I know we are gaining ground."

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