



Dr. Gilbert John - Microbiologist

1



I grew up on the Navajo Reservation in an area called the Four Corners region, where the borders of Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado come to a single point. My home, which we did not own, was company housing; my dad worked for an oil company on the reservation. As a child, I had the unusual experience of getting on a bus every morning and traveling an hour and a half off the reservation to a town in the state of Utah, just to attend school. The predominantly Mormon school was the closest in the area, and a number of other Native Americans in the area were also bused in.

It was apparent that we were outsiders. The school even went as far as dividing the classroom, with almost all the Native American students on one side and the white students on the other. The school proclaimed that the class was broken up according to academic comprehension and that the Native American students happened to have more deficiencies. Regardless of the explanation, the division created a rift in the classroom, and I can recall people talking poorly of the Native American students, labeling us as less intelligent.

I was fortunate enough to have teachers who felt I could succeed on the “white side.” I recall some of my friends, who were not as fortunate, being taught things I was already familiar with. As a minority in class, I felt I had to do well, and I always saw it as a challenge to perform just as well as the white kids. Even when faced with this complicated and challenging environment, I was never discouraged from my interest in school.

My motivation to succeed in school came from my parents, namely my father, who at the dinner table would lecture my older sisters and me on the importance of a good education. It happened so frequently that I can remember thinking to myself, “Wow! Here we go again!” Because we never owned a home and our small community (15 houses) was located in an isolated rural desert area, with very few opportunities for people to live well, my father viewed education as a ticket for his three children to get out of there.

My oldest sister was the first to go off to college and my other sister was next. Both inspired me to follow their lead because I always looked up to them. To ensure my chances of being well-prepared for college, I left home to attend a college preparatory high school called the Marine Military Academy in south Texas. Through an organization known as the Navajo Code Talkers, Marine veterans of World War II, I was given a scholarship to attend the academy. Although it was difficult to leave home, the experience was very rewarding. Not only did it teach me discipline, but it really showed me that college was the path I wanted to take.

After the military academy, I attended Colorado State University. Once there, I would think back to my childhood, living on the reservation, being bused to school, and dealing with racism in a predominately white town. It felt like I had made it, lived up to the expectations of my family. The best part: there were no dividing barriers! My college roommates were white and African American, and we would laugh because this arrangement was not common, but it was also not looked on as bad, either. Even though we were all racially different, we shared the same passion: to succeed in college.

My interest at the time was to become a veterinarian, which stemmed from my childhood, when my father and I would ride horses. I absolutely loved horses (and even did some rodeo!) and the thought of working with horses for a living seemed very gratifying. To become a veterinarian, I began taking the required

science courses—one of which was microbiology. Working with that complex world, invisible to the naked eye, sparked my interest. I was able to see firsthand that science isn't just fun to learn, but the results from scientific research can help people live longer and more enjoyable lives. So I decided to change paths and pursue a Ph.D. in microbiology at Colorado State University.

I now teach microbiology at Oklahoma State University, and I love my job. I work hard at my university so it can be a place without the barriers and limitations I experienced early in my education. Besides being a professor, I am the president of the Native American Faculty and Staff Association. Our organization provides scholarships to Native American students on campus to ease some of the financial burden of college. We also organize events, sponsor motivational speakers, and fund other areas of the school in order to inspire students to succeed. Through this organization, I hope that we can knock down obstacles that get in the way of students reaching their goals.

Native Americans are truly underrepresented in biomedical science. Because I am one of the few Native American microbiologists out there, I think it is very important for young kids to have access to minority role models in the sciences, which will hopefully give them the needed encouragement to pursue science as a career. My vision and hope for the future is that someday, as more Native Americans enter the field of science and research, we can establish a research institution on the reservation. We would train future scientists and physicians of all races. A step of this magnitude could open a lot of possibilities for Native American youth, but first more barriers must fall.

I am now in a position to make a difference, and my father showed me that education was the ticket to get there. His wish for me was to surpass his own accomplishments, to be happy, and to make an impact in life. This was because he never had the educational opportunities that I was given. His memories of his job were of moving from place to place and working day, evening, and night shifts to make a living for his family. About six years ago, I happened to be driving with my wife and kids in the Four Corners region, the place where I grew up. I decided to show them where I used to live, but when we got there, nothing was left of the housing compound except a few structural fragments and familiar trees that I remembered playing around. It confirmed what my father had taught me: You have to build the strongest foundation possible if you want a house to last.