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DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION

# Empowering Native American women to reach their dreams

ASU offers free MBA-level courses in one-week program

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**D**enella Belin, a member of the Navajo Nation, grew up watching native women prepare food for their families. Her mother had her own business making Navajo tacos, sun-brewed tea, steamed corn soup, chef salad, and roast mutton sandwiches wrapped in fry bread. For

▲ *Project DreamCatcher Class of 2022 ceremony at the ASU Thunderbird School of Global Management*

20 years, her mother Louise Begay, and father Lee Manygoats, would set up shop at flea markets and fairs, cooking the traditional dishes with a propane tank and portable grill to support her family. When the flea markets and fairs did not suffice, Begay would take her kitchen to Highway 89 and sell her dishes to jewelry vendors along the highway. “Native American women are the

ultimate backbone of their families, and every male figure that we have in our family will always be dependent on us women,” Belin said. But traditional Navajo dishes aren’t always the healthiest, and after having her own child and becoming borderline diabetic through the foods she was eating growing up, Belin sought to promote healthy eating in Paradise Valley. That’s why the trained chef recently took part in the latest cohort of Project DreamCatcher, which graduated 21 aspiring entrepreneurs in its fifth installment in October, through its affiliation with Arizona State University’s Thunderbird School of Global Management.

**What is Project DreamCatcher?** Created by the Freeport-McMorrison Foundation, the philanthropic arm of the Phoenix-based mining giant, Project DreamCatcher is a free development program that offers MBA-level business classes and mentorship to Native American women entrepreneurs through

the Thunderbird school. In existence for a nearly a decade, Project DreamCatcher participants learn marketing, leadership, and bookkeeping skills as well as how to create a business plan, how to obtain access to capital, and visits to established Native American organizations and business owners. The program accepts participants from 14 different tribes. “Project DreamCatcher provides a supportive community where Native American women can not only gain strategic business skills, but also nurture professional relationships that can help them as they start or grow their businesses,” Dinora Gonzalez, project manager for Project DreamCatcher, said in a statement. “This is a place for Native American women to share their culture, dreams and goals with other like-minded entrepreneurs,” she added. “Our goal is to empower these women to pursue their dreams by helping them develop

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the skills critical to their success.”

Belin joined Project Dream-Catcher in hopes of networking with indigenous businessmen and women who could potentially help her launch her own Native American culinary school. A 2007 graduate of the Scottsdale Institute of Culinary Arts, Belin’s goal is to teach Native American youth how to incorporate healthy ingredients into their diets while also teaching them about the origins of the food and their ancestors.

“I wanted to be involved because not many opportunities come my way. I honestly didn’t know that it was going to unfold as it did. I learned that a small idea that seemed really far reached for me is actually in the palm of my hands if I can utilize all the basic tools that Project DreamCatcher has provided me,” Belin said.

Although the program is only one-week long, Belin found an opportunity.

“On my first night as part of the

program, I received an opportunity to go to build a culinary program,” she said. “The person that actually provided the opportunity is a member of the board, and he said he has contacts directly with the community who are looking for a culinary program for their youth. I was asked to provide my personal info and that they would reach out and direct me to the right person to possibly have a program like that one day with the local tribes.”

While she awaits the call, Belin is providing indigenous food demos at local school districts. She recently partnered with the Tempe school district where she taught classes on basic culinary skills and the variety of ways to incorporate blue corn into a diet, a staple food in many indigenous communities.

“I bring items or foods grown locally, harvested locally, or produced by other Native American tribes,” Belin said. “I make a menu out of it or a recipe. And that recipe I showcase in front of community members or Native American community members.”

Belin credits Project Dream-





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◀ *Denella Belin (center in red) attends Project Dreamcatcher graduation.*

Catcher for the networking opportunities it created.

“The sisterhood you gain, the women you come across, are all coming together, putting our fears, our solutions, and our ideas all on the table,” Belin said.

Her long-term goal is to be able to provide an opportunity to the Native American youth and to inspire them to be in the culinary world, regardless of the limitations put on them due to being Native American. “Wherever they go in the kitchen, there’s an opportunity,” Belin said.

**Fostering entrepreneurs**

Although Belin’s idea is still currently in the ideation phase, some program graduates now have operating businesses.

April Tinhorn graduated from Project DreamCatcher’s first cohort in 2015 and has gone on to success-

fully grow her business, Tinhorn Consulting LLC, where she helps clients disrupt perceptions about Indigenous People via the media.

“I believe that I am the brand for my company and a lot of the work that I do is really just showing what’s possible for us as Native women to own our own businesses and do it authentically, where we don’t compromise who we are and can uplift our communities with you,” Tinhorn said.

In 2015, Tinhorn was approached by Project DreamCatcher to help with the program’s relationship-building with different tribal communities. What was initially a career development opportunity became a business venture that would expand the reach of Project DreamCatcher. At that time, Project DreamCatcher lacked the minimum number of applicants to actually start a program despite having all the necessary resources to have a cohort such as funding and curriculum.

“That’s where I saw where my business could help with our relationship with different tribal com-



*April Tinhorn is a former participant of Project DreamCatcher and still works with the program.*

munities because, at that time, they were only offering the program to five different tribes in Arizona,” Tinhorn said. “It was cool to be able to be recruited and also to have them become a client in literally the same meeting.”

Since her graduation, Tinhorn has retained Project DreamCatcher as a client and works as part of its outreach, interviewing, advisement, and training programs. She said her experience in the cohort gives participants the ease to ask a lot of unsaid questions that are really important to them.

Over time, Tinhorn has seen the program expand and noticed many business owners forming natural partnerships and mentorships. She was awarded the 2017 American Indian Business of the Year by The American Indian Chamber of Commerce of Arizona (AICCAz) and her hope is to shift the paradigm for tribal people.

“If you ever want to really make a change in tribal communities, buy and invest from a native woman business owner, and you’ll do that,” Tinhorn said. ▮