



## ASSOCIATION ON AMERICAN INDIAN AFFAIRS

Protecting Sovereignty • Preserving Culture

Educating Youth • Building Capacity

SINCE 1922

## 75 Years of Native American Scholarships

The Association on American Indian Affairs scholarship program was established in 1947 and is the oldest Native American scholarship program serving Indian Country. Along with this being the Association's 75<sup>th</sup> year of supporting education through scholarships, it is also the Associations 100<sup>th</sup> year of service to Indian Country protecting sovereignty, preserving culture, educating youth and building capacity.

Shortly after its creation in 1922, the Association endured, along with the rest of the country, a significant and overwhelming financial burden caused by the Great Depression. A severe lack of funding in the mid-1930s left the Association's President Oliver La Farge with a choice – to shut down the organization or continue to fight. His dedication to advance the right of Native Americans pushed him to keep the organization running out of his own home while supporting himself with freelance writing. Although the organization struggled to keep up their momentum in the 1930s, the Association reemerged after the conclusion of the devastating financial recession with more fervor than before. In the 1940s, they added new initiatives, one of which was aimed at supporting Native youth who were seeking higher education.

Florence Ivy Begay, Navajo, was the Association's first scholarship recipient. In February 1947, the Association partnered with Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, New York to offer a four-year scholarship which would cover full tuition and housing for a Navajo student. When Florence graduated high school, she was one of only three people in her school's history to complete all four years with straight A's. She aspired to become a doctor so that she could serve her Nation. When she was offered this generous scholarship, she joyfully accepted. However, an event occurred that interrupted her journey. Florence was travelling through Amarillo, Texas when she was forced to sit at the back of the bus. Florence was outraged by the segregation she witnessed in Texas. As soon as the bus reached Oklahoma City, she terminated her journey and enrolled in Arizona State College. Florence's story made national news and was featured in newspapers and radio shows across the country including the New York Times and Washington Post.

In 1948, the Association began the process of formally organizing its scholarship program. The Association undertook a survey to better understand the amount and the scope of the opportunities that were already open to Indigenous students for college, technical, and professional training. It was clear that financial resources were lacking to send Native students to college.

The survey concluded that more resources were needed to make advanced education available to all Native Americans rather than just exceptional students, including average college students. Even an average student who was white had a much better chance of obtaining higher education and specialized training. Furthermore, the Association noted that there was no central place in which complete information was available on advanced educational opportunities for Native Americans. Therefore, the Association published in their journal *The American Indian* a list of all funding opportunities they could find and urged people to contact them if they knew of more, so that they could publish and circulate further information to Tribes and Native students.

The Association continued to grow its scholarship program in the 1950s by establishing an Education Committee, and further establishing a subcommittee called the Scholarship Committee whose first meeting was held in October 1955. The Scholarship Committee included influential figures, one of whom was Ella Deloria, "one of the first truly bilingual, bicultural figures in American anthropology, and an extraordinary scholar, teacher, and spirit who pursued her own work and commitments under notoriously adverse conditions." Her nephew was Vine Deloria Jr., a well-known scholar and intellectual.

The Association's scholarship program was wide reaching. They received letters and applications from across Indian Country. One student, Joe Louis Jimenez from Nambe Pueblo, wrote a letter of appreciation to the Association in 1959: "Let me tell you that what you have granted me will not in any way be a bad investment. Gosh, if you could understand my Indian language, I would thank you in that language, for the reason I feel that the English-speaking peoples have not made a word or words to express the appreciation that I have for your kind and tremendous aid. Now I can not only pay for a number of things, but also feel like a tree whose branches are being blown from side to side but can depend on the strong roots holding it firmly and steadfastly to the ground."

The Association granted on average about forty scholarships per year until 1960. In that year, the organization partnered with the Congregational Church for Scholarships to Indians with the set objectives of awarding more scholarships, encouraging and counseling the scholarship recipients, providing information on additional grant and scholarship opportunities and disseminating that information widely. Tillie Walker, a Mandan Hidatsa woman, became the Director of the program. She travelled extensively throughout the country, visiting schools and reservations to inform Native youth about scholarship opportunities available to them. This partnership became known as the United Scholarship Service and it was hugely successful - awarding upwards of 120 scholarships per year.

With Native student college enrollment at only 2,000 in 1957, it was clear that the education system needed to be redefined by Native people. So, in addition to continuing to build the scholarship program, the Association involved itself with early childhood education. These programs include the Project Head Start program, which began in 1966 and the formation of the Association's National Committee on Indian Education, which worked to help improve gross deficiencies in education offered to Native children. Through that committee, the formation of local Indian School Boards and Indian Administration of local school programs were established, to promote cultural values and traditions in the curricula. The Native student population in higher education has risen to over 116,000 since the early years of the Associations involvement in the education of Native youth, in part because of these worthwhile programs. There is still work to be done to ensure that Native students receive the equity in education that they deserve.

Throughout its history, the Association has created many scholarships named for its donors or in memory of special individuals who represent strength, perseverance and fortitude. Some of those individuals that have been memorialized by the Association's scholarships have been: **Ragna Homborg–Norman M. Crooks–Emilie Hesemeyer–Allogan Slagle (Keetoowah)–David Risling (Hoopa/Karok/Yurok)–Adolph Van Pelt–Florence Young–Elizabeth and Sherman Asche–Owanah Anderson (Choctaw)–Mary Hemenway.**

The Association's current scholarship program provides a scholarship for Fall and Spring semesters until the student graduates if the student maintains a 2.5 grade point average and maintains status as a full-time student. **In the past seven years, the Association has awarded 304 scholarships to 114 Native undergraduate and graduate students.** The Association will continue this seventy-five-year-old legacy program and is grateful for donors and contributors who believe that protecting sovereignty, preserving culture, educating youth and building capacity is important to advocacy and representation! Be a part of the legacy of advocacy and representation through your investment in Native American students in higher education.