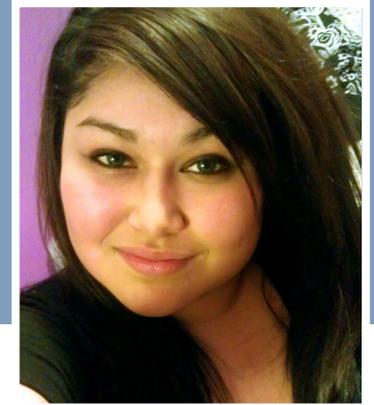




IMPACT PROFILE: DORALEE ORTEZ



NATIVE-AMERICAN NURSES “BREAK THROUGH” BASIC ED BARRIER

What makes the difference between a dropout who carries the burden of an interrupted education for many years and someone who gets back to school and moves forward? The answer for Doralee Ortez, 19, was hard work, dedication, and a fast-track certification program developed by Breaking Through, an initiative managed by JFF and NCWE.

Doralee was a smart, well-performing high school student—when she went to class. But neither of the high schools she attended really engaged or supported her enough to motivate her to show up each day.

“I could do the work, but the time I missed pushed me back,” recalls Doralee, a member of the Lummi Tribe in Washington State. “When I should have been a senior, they said I was just a sophomore. So I just dropped out. But later, I still wanted to go to college, so I went to get my GED.”

“I WANTED TO GET IN, GET CERTIFIED, AND START MY CAREER. I DIDN’T WANT TO FEEL LIKE I’D BE STUCK IN ANOTHER SCHOOL.”

Only 3 percent of GED holders ever earn a postsecondary credential, partly because many are underprepared for college work and drop out rather than spend more time and money on non-credit developmental courses.

Fortunately, her older sister Jessica was in an accelerated Breaking Through nursing assistant program at Northwest Indian College on the Lummi Indian Reservation in Bellingham, WA. She was on track to earn a credential in only 1.5 semesters and urged Doralee to join her.

With its Bellingham campus and six full-service satellites in Washington, Oregon, and Idaho, NWIC is the only accredited tribal college in these states. NWIC is also one of six tribal colleges across the nation participating

in Breaking Through, an initiative to help low-skilled adults prepare for and succeed in occupational and technical degree programs. Forty-one colleges nationwide participate in Breaking Through. During NWIC’s 18-month participation in the program, it has helped 189 students earn 350 industry-recognized credentials.

“From day one, it was a great experience,” Doralee says. “I wanted to go in every day. The lessons really moved fast, which was actually a relief because I wanted to get in, get certified, and start my career. I didn’t want to feel like I’d be stuck in another school.”

The first of its kind among tribal colleges, Doralee’s nursing program is based on Washington State’s I-BEST model; a nursing instructor and a basic skills instructor developed and taught courses together. This allowed students to earn a GED while simultaneously earning college credit.

In addition to accelerated curricula, Breaking Through students benefit from non-academic supports that help them navigate college as efficiently as possible. For example, they can receive guidance on which classes they need to take and how to apply for financial aid.

“I learned how to create a resume and fill out job applications,” Doralee says. “My teachers and the program leaders were always there. I got a lot of one-on-one time with them. One of my teachers actually helped me study for my GED test and gave me practice tests.”

Doralee also appreciates how NWIC incorporates her own culture into academic and career skills training. For instance, it includes traditional Lummi plant and food knowledge into the nutrition curriculum and discusses traditional Native-American medicine alongside Western medical care practices.

"Preparing to serve your community and understand Native culture, the needs and customs of your elders especially, connects me more to my heritage and better prepares me to do my job well."

After earning a nursing assistant certificate and working with memory-care patients, Doralee has decided she may enjoy dentistry even more and is heading back to NWIC to become a certified dental assistant. By next year, she plans

to have an Associate's degree in dental assisting and a job in the Bellingham region. As for her sister Jessica, she is now a dental receptionist training to become a hygienist.

"I recommend NWIC's nursing assistant program to all my friends," Doralee says. "It's fast-paced, and you're not in it very long. And when you're done, you have the skills to go get a really good job."

Breaking Through

Breaking Through is a multiyear demonstration project that promotes and strengthens the efforts of innovative community colleges across the country to help low-literacy adults prepare for and succeed in occupational and technical degree programs. The goal is to strengthen postsecondary outcomes for low-income adults by focusing on strategies that create more effective pathways through pre-college and degree-level programs.

The initiative consists of 41 community colleges across 22 states. It includes a peer learning network of six tribal colleges, co-coordinated by the American Indian Higher Education Consortium and supported by the Walmart Foundation.

Breaking Through is co-managed by JFF and the National Council for Workforce Education, an organization of community college-based workforce development leaders.

Jobs for the Future works with our partners to design and drive adoption of education and career pathways leading from college readiness to career advancement for those struggling to succeed in today's economy.



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