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SEVEN COMPLETE INAUGURAL NAVAJO TRANSCRIPTION PROGRAM

One thing that the students in the Navajo Technical University tribal court transcription program had to do was to write a 5-page paper entirely in the Navajo language – a daunting task for just about any student.

However, these were not ordinary students. The seven students, or the Magnificent Seven as they called themselves, started the program in August, and by December, they had each graduated with a certificate in the newly developed program.

They are also employees of the Judicial Branch of the Navajo Nation. Five are district court clerks, one is an office technician and one is a traditional program specialist with the Peacemaking Program.

Dr. Elmer Guy, president of NTU, noted during the welcome address at the commencement ceremony on Friday that this program is the only one of its kind. The purpose was to give the students the skills to transcribe the Navajo language.

"It is important to preserve our own language - both oral and written," said acting Chief Justice Thomas J. Holgate. "This is really something significant that our employees accomplished. I am glad that the Judicial Branch is headed in this direction."

The Judicial Branch had long ago identified the need for transcribing the Navajo language. When court hearings are transcribed, the parts utilizing the Navajo language are most often left out with only a notation that the portion is spoken in Navajo.

Those parts that are left out are often the most important part of the hearing though, and they are often what contain Diné bi beenahaz'áanii, or Fundamental Law.

Navajo Nation judges were given a special role through Resolution CN-69-02, which states in part, “when the judges adjudicate a dispute using these fundamental laws, they should thoroughly explain so that we can all learn...”

Having access to records in their entirety, including the portions that are spoken in Navajo, is important for the Judicial Branch to carry out this role.

During a reception honoring the seven graduates, Associate Justice Eleanor Shirley told the graduates that they now have a skill that is very rare and that they should share this skill for the benefit of their people.

“I am very, very proud of you,” she said.

There were many challenges such as technical problems with recordings, lack of computers at the beginning of the program and uncertainty of classroom locations, but there were also rewarding experiences.

Rhiannon Guerro, who works at the Crownpoint Judicial District, said that her biggest challenge was in reading and writing the Navajo language. “I didn’t know how to read or write Navajo which became difficult for me but having teachers and fellow students helping me, I overcame those obstacles,” she said.

Guerro also said that she gained another family with the women who all went through the program together and she is hoping to continue to stay in contact with them.

For Ruby K. Frank, who works as a traditional program specialist at Ramah, trying to translate legal terminology in the Navajo language was one of the biggest challenges.

"All the classes I attended were beneficial. It allowed me to obtain new skills, knowledge and having confidence," she said.

Maris Roe, who works at Ramah Judicial District, was proud to announce that she graduated with a 4.0 grade point average. She noted that the group was often unsure where their classrooms would be and they had problems with the court recordings. However, she said that the most rewarding part for her was she had the opportunity to test her ability and to prove to herself that if she can set her mind to obtain and achieve her goals, anything is possible.

For Peggy L. Bahe, who works at Dilkon Judicial District, the greatest reward was getting to know herself and the traditional culture and philosophy. She said, “No matter how old you are, you can always learn. Every day is a learning experience.”

The program requires 32 credit hours in classes including Introduction to Navajo Language, Technical Writing, American Indian Law, Introduction to Court Transcription and Interpretation/Translation.

The seven students who completed the program are Peggy L. Bahe from Teesto, Ariz.; Ruby K. Frank from Pine Hill, N.M.; Rhiannon Guerro from Crownpoint, N.M.; Shirley M. Leonard from Lukachukai, Ariz.; Ronda Lewis from Tohatchi, N.M.; Joann Plummer from Rock Point, Ariz.; and Maris J. Roe from Pine Hill, N.M.

The program was paid for with one-time funding that the Judicial Branch received from the Bureau of Indian Affairs specifically to implement the program.

The Judicial Branch thanks Dr. Guy and Dr. Wesley Thomas for partnering with the branch to offer this program. The graduates thank all the instructors who taught them while at NTU.

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