

Setting Her Own Limits

Kiana Kaye, Undergraduate, Diné
Hometown: Tucson, AZ

by Amy Weisbaum

Q: What sparked your interest in environmental health?

It all started with the program that Ace introduced me to: the Native American Science and Engineering Program (NASEP). We were given different projects. My involvement with the geosciences project is how I learned about AISES, where I first did my research presentation. My mom works in public health so I have always been interested in health, helping my community, and making a difference.

Q: How has your community influenced your academic pursuits?

I was born in the city, but I've seen how people live on the reservation. I would go home for the summer to see my grandparents and would help them get water from the water troughs on the rez. I saw people struggle to get clean water that isn't really that clean. This is a problem on so many reservations. People don't necessarily think it's a large issue, but many diseases and problems that happen later in people's lives are because of bad water.

Q: What advice do you have for Native youth?

We are the voice. We are the next generation that is going to be taking care of the people. People think they can stereotype us. They don't think we can, but we can.

Q: If you weren't studying environmental science and public health, what would you be doing?

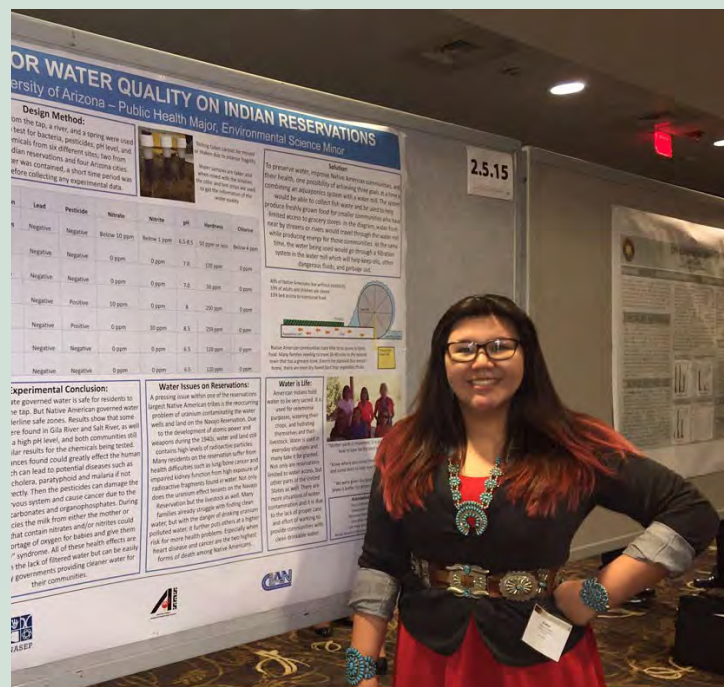
If I wasn't doing that, I would want to be a teacher. It was my 3rd grade teacher who really inspired me. I've done tutoring before and think it's great to help people learn and knowing I can make that change in someone. Seeing that light bulb go off in their head, just watching them understand it is exciting. I've always wanted to be a teacher, but I felt more of a connection with community health and environmental science so I'm going into that and public health.

Q: What is the greatest challenge you face right now heading into community health and environmental science?

One of the biggest challenges is that I am Native American and a woman. A lot of people look at me and they don't think I can do it. I set my own limitations. I know I'm ambitious and independent. People can't tell me what I can and can't do because only I can do that. That's just one of the biggest challenges – people doubting me, but I love showing people and proving them wrong. Knowing that I'm a woman in STEM, I'm pushing other people to be more involved in science. I've always loved science but people used to make fun of me for being a science nerd when I was taking honors and science courses. Even my senior year in high school, I took three different sciences: physics, AP biology and engineering.

Q: Compared to high school, how are things different now since you have been in college?

The difference is the opportunities that have been presented to me. I knew I was independent in high school, but I didn't know how much I had to rely on myself in college. It wasn't until my recent conference in Louisiana that I realized the full picture of what I'm actually doing. I'm only a freshman, and I have this big impact already – people were surprised at the conference because I was with upperclassmen, graduates, doctoral and post-doc students and I was the only freshman at that conference.



Kiana presenting her poster at a conference in Louisiana
(Photograph by Agnes Attakai)