

Indigenous Leadership Academy Fall 2023 Cohort

Phoenix, Ariz. — The [American Indian Policy Institute](#) (AIPI) is thrilled to announce the Fall 2023 cohort of the [Indigenous Leadership Academy](#) (ILA)! With a focus on emerging leaders, there is no other leadership program like this in the country. Twenty-five of fifty-five applicants have been accepted into the cohort. Their demographics represent 15 tribes and Native Hawaiian from 10 states. All participants demonstrated a strong passion for working with and for Indigenous communities. Some topics the participants are passionate about are: behavioral/mental health, civic engagement, economic development, education, policy, and youth. We are excited to have such a diverse group of participants. The AIPI is delighted to see what wonderful things this cohort will accomplish. Please read about each cohort member below.



Rosa Alvarez

“Liojs enchaniabu, Kethcem allea, inepo Rosa Soto Alvarez. Blessings! My name is Rosa Soto Alvarez. I am an enrolled Pascua Yaqui Tribal member. I was raised and continue to live on the Pascua Yaqui reservation in Tucson, Az. I am happily married to my best friend of 26 years, a mother of three and a blessed grandmother of six. In 2012 I was elected and honored to have served on Tribal Council for The Pascua Yaqui Tribe. I served two terms (8 yrs.) and became a National Advocate for the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA). I did not seek re-election in 2020 and started my own business. I am the owner of Cocina Alvarez. I recently attended and graduated from Project Dreamcatcher through the Thunderbird School of Global Management at ASU. Graduate of Summer 2023 Cohort. Currently, I am the Youth Leadership Coordinator and oversee the Yaqui Youth Council and Youth Collaborative Committee for the

Pascua Yaqui Tribe. Enchim mampo tawak tua Liojs enchiokwe uttesia! “It’s in your hands, God Bless.””



Michelle Bigman

Michelle Bigman (Navajo) is a Water Contract & Information Analyst for SRP’s Water Rights & Contracts group, she is responsible for thoroughly reviewing contract terms and conditions before negotiating favorable terms with local municipalities on behalf of Salt River Project (SRP). As a seasoned water rights professional with more than 16 years of experience, Michelle continues to be inspired by the innovation and technology of the utility industry. Her shared passion for water resource management, community service and leadership prompted her to serve on the Tempe Leadership Council, and chair one of SRP’s highly esteemed Employee Resource Groups, N.A.T.I.V.E. (a.k.a. Native Americans Together In Vision & Empowerment), that aims to encourage cultural awareness and act as a bridge to the native community. Michelle holds a bachelor’s degree in Business Administration from Northern Arizona

University. On a personal note, Michelle grew up in LeChee, Arizona – a small community on the Navajo Reservation. She moved to the Valley in 2007 and has built a fruitful life in Phoenix with her two children. In her spare time, Michelle loves to walk her three dogs.



Heidi K. Brandow

(Diné & Kānaka Maoli) is a versatile artist whose work prioritizes the inclusion of Indigenous people and perspectives in the creation of ethical and sustainable forms of artistic expression. Alongside co-founding the Harvard Indigenous Design Collective, which champions design by and for Indigenous communities as an integral component of design fields' history, theory, and practice, Heidi also serves as a Master Artist Mentor at the Institute of American Indian Arts' Master of Fine Arts - Studio Arts Program. She has furthered her impact as an Artist Liaison at the Coe Center for Art and as a former Tribal Liaison with Local Contexts, assisting Indigenous communities in reclaiming authority of their material culture and archives. With an educational background spanning the Institute of American Indian Arts, Istanbul Technical University's Industrial Design program, and a Master of Design Studies from

the Harvard Graduate School of Design, Brandow's artistic vision and expertise extend across multiple disciplines and mediums.



Mauricia Chavarria-Quam

Mauricia Chavarria-Quam is an enrolled member of Santa Clara Pueblo ("SCP") in Northern New Mexico. Throughout the years, she has used her knowledge, experience, and connections to advance her beloved community in many areas. She encompasses vast experience primarily focusing on accounting, finance, public utilities, and business development. Mauricia currently works for the Incorporated County of Los Alamos as the Accounting Ops Manager and Public Utilities Accountant. Previous experience includes working for the State of NM via the Department of Transportation, Aging and Long-Term Services Department, and the Environment Department as well as the Los Alamos National Laboratory. Moreover, Mauricia was appointed to serve on the Board of Directors for the SCP Development Corporation, Kha'p'ó Construction Services, and the SCP Utility Authority, respectively. She was

also appointed to serve on the Board of Trustees for the Bureau of Indian Education for a term. Most recently, Mauricia completed the National Congress of American Indians inaugural "Tribal Leaders Executive Education Program" at Harvard University in Boston. The instruction received certainly compliments her BSBA and MBA from NM State University. Overall, her goal is to use the knowledge, experience, and networks attained to promote self-sufficiency and increase life path opportunities for future generations.



Damon Clark

Damon J. Clark, Diné, is currently a Policy Analyst with the Office of Navajo Government Development, Navajo Nation Legislative Branch in Window Rock, AZ. Damon is Near the Water Clan and Born for Near the Water's Edge Clan. Before working with his tribal nation, Mr. Clark was a Confidential Assistant for the Office of Management & Budget at the White House and a Digital Organizing Associate for the Biden-Harris campaign in Arizona where he managed a statewide Relational Organizing Program. Prior to the 2020 campaign, Damon was a postgraduate travel fellow in New Zealand, built an off-grid cabin, & taught a summer literature class for first-generation students. During his undergraduate studies at Harvard College, Mr. Clark concentrated in Social Studies and had internships at the Department of Commerce, Office of the Secretary & the White House Office of Intergovernmental Affairs &

Public Engagement. Damon loves to herd sheep with his wife, do woodworking, smoke BBQ, and golf.



Rachel Fernandez

“Pōsōh māwaw new weyak
Hello everybody
Newīswan Namāēwkūkiw
My name is Sturgeon Woman
Rachel Fernandez eneq āēkāēyan
Rachel Fernandez is what I’m called
Netōtāēm āwew awāēhsaeh
My clan is bear.

I am a member of the Menominee Indian Tribe of WI. I am a wife, mother, grandmother, daughter, and sister. I am founder and Executive Director of Maeqtekuahkihiw Metaemohsak, Woodland Women. We are elder led and promote healing and life way teachings. We are rooted in the community through cultural care and advocacy. I am also an elected Menominee Tribal Legislator and have been appointed for my second term to Wisconsin Women’s Council by Governor Tony Evers. I have been an advocate, organizer and survivor fighting against gender-based and environmental violence for many years. My experience empowers me to open doors, lead, and lift my brothers and sisters up. I am truly honored to be a part of the Indigenous Leadership Academy.”



Bernina Gray

Bernina Gray is a Diné entrepreneur and mother originally from Lukachukai, Arizona. She began her career in tech as a software developer, then founded nDigitize - a tech company dedicated to digitizing Native-owned businesses. She started the company during the pandemic to help businesses establish their online presence and has since developed five years of experience in brand design, software development, UX design, and technology-related consultations and solutions. Bernina is passionate about expanding her knowledge in the data and FinTech sector and is committed to creating technology-driven solutions to serve Native communities.



Effie Hernandez

“Hello, my name is Effie Hernandez and I currently work as the Multicultural Coordinator at the College of Eastern Idaho. I am an enrolled Tribal member of the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes of Fort Hall, Idaho. I am a first-generation college student who completed their bachelor and master’s program. I have worked in higher education for seven years. I started with recruiting for my alma mater in 2016, the University of Idaho, where I earned my bachelor’s degree in Organizational Science and minor in American Indian studies. I started working for College of Eastern Idaho in 2019 as a recruiter. In 2020 I helped write and create my current position because I felt that it was a need for the college. During my professional career, I have completed my master’s program with Idaho State University in Educational Leadership. I love spending time with family and friends, and discovered that I love traveling. I have a cat

named Eddy who has been great company. I look forward to being a part of the Indigenous Leadership Academy. I believe this will expand my knowledge to help my tribal community and the college I serve.”



Terri Honani

“Loloma! Nu’ Pamösmana yan Hopi maatsiwa, nikyaang nu’ Terri Honani yan pahan maatsiwa. Nu’ Hopi Sino, pu pew Tewa Sino. Nu’ Pipwungwa, nikyaang nu’ Tawat anq. Nu’ Executive Advisor for Chairman Nuvangyaoma of The Hopi Tribe ep tumalayta.

Greetings! My Hopi name is Fog Girl and my English name is Terri Honani. I am half Hopi and half Tewa of the Tobacco Clan from the Village of Tewa. I currently have the honor of serving as the Executive Advisor for Chairman Nuvangyaoma of the Hopi Tribe.

I am an alumna of Arizona State University where I received my Bachelor’s Degree in Science in Exercise & Wellness Health Promotions. I am a fourth-generation rancher. I enjoy being outdoors and learning about our homelands, natural resources and wildlife. I would like to find ways to

strengthen our tribal government and also make improvements to it in the ever-changing Western society while advocating for our Hopi culture, history, and value system to be incorporated into the work we do, the services we want to provide for our community members and all living things that we are ultimately stewards for. I believe in being teachable as well as paying it forward. Askwali, koonah! Thank you.”



Mishan Jack-Gonzalez

Mishani Jack-Gonzalez is an enrolled member of the Confederated Tribes and Bands of the Yakama Nation in Washington State. She attended Washington State University where she majored in psychology and minored in criminal justice. Mishani has a passion for tribal law and justice and has demonstrated this in years of work with Yakama Nation Tribal Court as a Court Clerk, Advocate, and Court Administrator, as well as gaining valuable knowledge with her local Superior Court, and United States District Court. This work eventually led her to her current position with the Washington State AOC as the Tribal Relations Court Program Analyst, a role in which she is grateful to have as she promotes cultural consciousness that supports tribal-state relations in the court. Mishani has also participated in WSU leadership programs, environmental cohorts, and is trained in mediation. She grew up on the

Yakama reservation and currently resides there with her husband and two growing children. She stays involved in her community through volunteer work, attending traditional feasts, hunting, fishing, gathering, beading, and learning her history. Through this cultural immersion she finds healing and strength in preservation and applies it to her work in creating a more equitable system.



Michael Kee

“I am a member of the Navajo Nation and reside on the Navajo Reservation (Shiprock, NM). My current employment is with Arizona Public Service at the Four Corners Power Plant as a Generation Maintenance Supervisor, which is also located on the Navajo Reservation. I began my career in the Operations department 20 years ago, working up through various plant departments, leading to my current role. In being employed with APS, I have been afforded opportunities volunteering at a corporate and local level, which includes projects on the Navajo Reservation. During this time, I have chaired the employee-led United Way campaign, maintained membership in the company’s Native employee network group, and received a Chairman’s Award for being proactive in improving employee safety utilizing our plant safety committee. While not at work, I prefer to spend time outdoors and

engage in the numerous hobbies I have. These hobbies include hiking, hand building pottery, grilling, and off-roading.”



Shayla Manitowabi-Huebner

Boozhoo! Shayla R. Manitowabi-Huebner is a proud citizen of Wiikwemkoong First Nation in Ontario, Canada. With a current base in the Greater Salt Lake Area, Shayla is dedicated to empowering Indigenous communities. Guided by an adopted and urban Native perspective, Shayla aims to embody the spirit of mino-bimaadiziwin (the good life), actively reclaiming what it means to be an Indigenous woman. Her goal is to deepen her involvement within her tribal community. A holder of B.S. and M.S. degrees in Exercise Science from Northern Michigan University and The University of Texas at Arlington, Shayla has established a robust academic foundation. She is also actively pursuing a Public Health Training Certificate for American Indian Health Professionals at Johns Hopkins University.

Shayla currently serves as a Scholarship Assistant at American Indian Services. In addition to her primary role, she founded and leads "Running Into Culture" at Indigenous Health and Wellness Connections. This innovative running program is designed to culturally enrich and uplift Native youth experiences. Outside of her professional pursuits, Shayla enjoys CrossFit and boxing, learning Anishinaabemowin, making traditional foods, traveling, powwow dancing, and competitive running.



Tori McGeshick

Tori McGeshick (She/her/hers) is from Getegitegaanig formally referred to as the Lac Vieux Desert Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians. Tori is honored being a mother of two, and raising the next generation. Tori earned a Bachelor of Arts & Science of Applied Speech Communication with a concentration in Advocacy at Ferris State University. She also earned a Masters of Legal Studies, Indigenous Peoples Law at the University of Oklahoma. Tori is dedicated to grassroots work as the UP Organizer for We the People Michigan Action Fund. She prides herself in being a mother of two, and having the responsibility of raising the next generation. Tori intentionally holds space for her people, as well as Mother Earth; by embodying traditional, spiritual, and cultural aspects throughout her journey as a leader.



Jarett Medicine Elk

"My name is Jarett D. Medicine Elk and I am from the Assiniboine, Northern Cheyenne and Three Affiliated tribes. Home for me is on the Fort Peck Reservation in Montana where I currently work as a business and art instructor at our tribal college. I am an aspiring social innovator and lifelong learner seeking connections and opportunities to serve in Native America. Most importantly, I am a big believer and appreciator of synergy - where we are worth more collectively than we are individually. So I am very much looking forward to contributing to and being edified by the other members of the upcoming leadership cohort. As a result of growing up on the reservation I am well aware of and acquainted with the social, economic, and cultural challenges that can inhibit growth within Native America. I look forward to connecting with others who can synergistically help me in creating and implementing healing

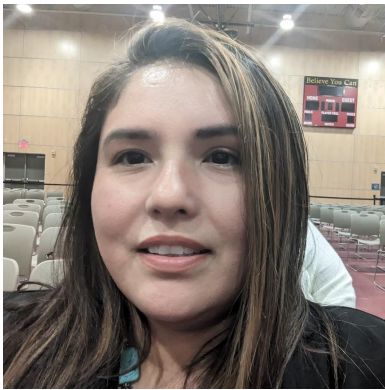
processes for indigenous peoples and communities. Pinamiya!"



Grant Navakuku

Grant Navakuku (Hopi) is a higher educational practitioner with seven years of experience serving students in high schools, community colleges, and universities. In addition to serving students in pursuit of their higher education, Grant also serves in the Arizona Army National Guard as a military police officer and is a coach for cross country, basketball, and track at Camelback high school. Grant is a supporter of lifelong learning and is a lifelong learner himself. He completed both his undergraduate and graduate studies at Arizona State University, earning degrees in Educational Studies, Learning Sciences, and Higher & Post Secondary Education. After gaining practical experience, Grant hopes to pursue a PhD to research the multiple factors of a Native American student's life – both advantages and disadvantages– that affect their pursuit of a higher education. Grant is dedicated to being a public servant and

is motivated by helping the next generation of students, soldiers, and athletes while they are in pursuit of their lifelong goals.



Dr. Millicent Pepion

Dr. Millicent Michelle Pepion is Bitter Water Clan born for the Blackfeet Nation. She currently resides in Tucson where she earned a Ph.D. in American Indian Studies from The University of Arizona. Her dissertation research draws connections between U.S. Census data for Native populations and Native Voter Suppression in Arizona. Dr. Pepion's survey included an overview of all 22 Native Nations in Arizona in comparison to county and state statistics regarding history, land, law, and representation. Through various work, Dr. Pepion has developed courses, workshops and presentations that span topics such as Federal Indian Law and Policy, Sovereignty, Native and Western Views on Philosophy, Protection of Sacred Places, Introduction to Navajo Literacy and Culture, Positive Indian Parenting, Traditional Indian Medicine, Indigenous Methodologies, and Writing in Two Worlds. Other degrees include: A.A. in

Liberal Arts (Haskell Indian Nations University, 2012), B.S. in Liberal Studies (Arizona State University, 2014), and M.S. in Family and Human Development (Arizona State University, 2016). Dr. Pepion is also a 2012 Clinton Global Initiative University Commitment Maker and the recipient of the Cal Seciwa Memorial Scholarship (ASU, 2015), the Heard Museum Eagle Spirit Award (ASU, 2016), and the Margaret Susseman Memorial Scholarship (UA, 2017-2020).



Annie Smith

Hello! My name is Annie Smith, I am an enrolled member of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation and a descendant of the Yakama Nation. I am the Native American Liaison and Success Coach at Blue Mountain Community College in Pendleton, Oregon. My role is shared between the college and the tribe's higher education program. I assist Native students with the admissions process, financial aid, and Tribal scholarship. I also coordinate events on campus to promote culture, history, and language. I am married with two children and a dog. I am an alumna of Fort Lewis College and the University of Arizona. I enjoy dancing at powwows, beading, weaving, and learning tribal language.



Terri Surveyor

Terri Surveyor comes from the Navajo, Hopi and Cheyenne-Arapaho nations. Nu Kwang’ Talangva, Qötsynom Hopi Matsiwaa, Shi ef Terri Surveyor yinishyé, Tó `Aheedlínii nishlj, Kisaaní baashichin, Áshjijí da’shichei, na’ané dashinali. Terri comes from the Water Flows Together clan, born for the Hopi tribe. She received her Bachelors of Art Degree in Digital Culture with a focus in film from Arizona State University in the Spring of 2020. During her time as an undergrad student at Arizona State University, Terri participated in Indigenous student events such as Tribal Nations Tour, INSPIRE, and was awarded Miss Congeniality at the Miss Indian ASU Pageant. Through her undergraduate experience, Terri developed a passion for promoting higher education for Indigenous youth and organizing. After graduating, Terri spent 3 years working

in the non-profit sector on the Hopi reservation and actively engaged with multiple non-profits on the Navajo and Hopi communities. She serves as the Communications Specialist for the National Indigenous Women’s Resource Center. Terri is dedicated to amplifying Indigenous voices, elevating their contributions, and empowering youth, thereby fostering greater opportunities for our communities both on and off reservations.



Melissa Thompson

Melissa Thompson, Dine, grew up in her hometown of Tucson, Arizona. Her family is from Gray Mountain and Leupp, Arizona. She graduated with her Bachelor’s in Native American Studies at Dartmouth College. She has also completed non-degree courses in various topics within business administration and project management. In her former role as a Senior Project Manager, she worked with Tribal governments and enterprises on strategic approaches to achieve their goals. Ms. Thompson is dedicated to continuous learning and growth in her many passions. Through her professional ambitions, she has focused on strengthening and uplifting Tribal communities and has had the opportunity to work with many Tribal Leaders, organizations, and communities throughout the country. Outside of her professional role, Melissa stays connected with Dartmouth alumni and Alpha Pi Omega Sorority, Inc. sisters

through various events and activities both locally and nationwide. She enjoys experiences around culture, arts, music, and learning alongside her family and friends.



Brett Treadway

Brett Treadway, a proud member of The Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, was born and raised in the town of Bryson City, just off the Qualla Boundary in Cherokee, North Carolina. Brett received his bachelor’s degree in Sustainability Studies from the University of Florida, as well as a minor within American Indian and Indigenous studies and Organic and Sustainable Crop Production. While completing his degree, Brett was active across multiple campus organizations focused on sustainability, climate activism, and outreach. Brett now resides in Boulder, CO where he works as a Program Associate for First Nations Development Institute’s *Stewarding Native Lands* program. Within his time at First Nations Development Institute Brett has been able to work across Indian Country, helping organize events for tribal communities, providing technical assistance, and helping tribes and tribal

nonprofits secure funding. Brett is passionate about environmentalism and sustainability and their relationship to tribal communities and his culture. He plans to continue his career within Indian Country with goals to eventually go back and work for his tribe. Outside of work Brett enjoys staying active in the mountains, spending time with friends and family, and reading.



Christina Varela

Christina Varela is an enrolled member of the Navajo Nation born and raised in Southern Utah. After years of working in customer service, Christina took that passion of helping others to the Bureau of Indian Affairs where she is a Realty Specialist. She currently holds a Masters of Public Administration from Southern Utah University and a Bachelor's Integrated Studies with an Emphasis on Business and Communication from Utah Tech University. In addition, she recently completed the Southern Utah University Alumni Leadership Academy. Growing up in a small community she found a passion to understand where her family comes from and that led to a heart for diversity and inclusion. Christina was raised between her maternal and her paternal family in Utah and California. Christina makes her home in Southern Utah where she raised her daughter Victoria. She enjoys traveling, reading, and

spending time with her bonus family in Arizona.



Precious Vicente

"Hello, my name is Precious Vicente. I am Akimel O'odham residing in the Gila River Indian Community. I currently serve as a Program Coordinator for Conservation legacy, a non-profit organization which specializes in helping young adults establish internships with the National Park Service, Bureau of Indian Affairs, and Forest Service. I applied with American Conservation Experience (ACE) and served as the organization's first Indian Youth Service Corps member. A position delegated by Secretary of the Interior, Deb Haaland. I was able to work in depth at Casa Grande Ruins National Monument, also known to the O'odham as Sivan Vahki. From my position with ACE I became the Conservation Legacy's Cultural Education Intern. I was then hired as a National Park Service Ranger! These experiences opened a lot of doors and opportunities to grow as a leader within the world of conservation. Most

recently I was awarded the 2023 Corpsmember of the Year. I was flown out to Washington D.C. to give an acceptance speech which focused on conservation history with the Akimel O'odham. It feels great knowing that I'm in a position that can help others establish positions within the Department of the Interior."



Autumn Rose Williams

Autumn Rose Miskweminanocsqua (Raspberry Star Woman) Williams (Shinnecock Indian Nation) is a Motivational Speaker and Public Relations Practitioner. Williams was born and raised on the Shinnecock Reservation near Southampton, New York. She graduated from Virginia Commonwealth University with a Bachelor of Science in Mass Communications and a Minor in Business. Williams currently works with Cahokia: SocialTech + ArtSpace as the PR & Media Coordinator for Indigenous Peoples' Day Fest 2023. She also is a Motivational Speaker with Keppler Speakers. Williams utilizes her communications skills to advocate for the accurate representation and inclusivity of Indigenous communities and to share her culture, and personal journey with mental health and body positivity. Serving as Miss Native American USA (2017-18), working as the Communications Manager for the

Shinnecock Nation and working with the Administration for Native Americans, ICF Next, and now with Cahokia: SocialTech + ArtSpace, Williams has seen firsthand the important work Indigenous leaders are doing to advocate for Indigenous communities. Inspired and determined to spread her message of self-empowerment to youth in Indian Country, Williams will participate in the Fall 2023 Indigenous Leadership Academy at Arizona State University. Her heartfelt desire is to effectuate positive change and encourage Indigenous youth to get involved in tribal and professional leadership.



Krysten Willie

“My name is Krysten Willie, I am a member of the Dinè tribe. Todich’ii’nii nishli, Ta’neeszahnii bashishchiin, Hooghan Lani dashicheii, Bit’ahnii dashinali. I was born and raised in Phoenix, Arizona and continue to enjoy the heat. I am the youngest in my family, I have two older sisters and retired parents. I am a single mother raising my 4-year-old son with support from my family. I graduated with a degree of Bachelor of Science in Electrical Engineering from New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology. After obtaining my degree I started my career with Arizona Public Service and have been working there for 9 years. My current position is Project Manager within the Generation department. As a project manager I work on different projects throughout our Gas & Oil Power plants. I am also the current chair for APS’s Employee Networking Group, Native American Networking Organization (NANO). With

NANO we work on professional development for our board members, and we also work within the community. In my free time I enjoy creating fun memories with my son and family. I also like to try new restaurants and check out new movies at home or in theaters.”



Kim Zahne

Kim Zahne (*she/they*) or “*Sah-Povi*” is Tobacco clan from the Village of Tewa, and a citizen of the Hopi Tribe. Kim is currently the Technical Assistance and Training Specialist for the National Indigenous Resource Center. She obtained a Bachelor of Science degree in American Indian Studies with an emphasis in Federal Indian Law, History, and Policy from Arizona State University. Zahne was also the Director of Training and Technical Assistance for the tribal coalition, Hopi-Tewa Women’s Coalition to End Abuse, for nearly five years. Their role included providing training and technical assistance for agencies, programs, and organizations in the Hopi Nation in areas of sexual assault, domestic violence, dating violence, stalking and sex trafficking. Zahne still engages in this work to end gender-based violence in Indigenous communities.

Kim believes in the healing strength of culture & family, Indigenous ceremonial practices and teachings, and Indigenous storytelling. Kim takes much pride and love in her role as a parent and spouse to an Indigenous/ Diné educator. They have 4 children, a dog, and two cats. Kim enjoys spending time with her family, clan relatives, village, reading, and talking about QTBIPOC books.