Desert Horse-Grant is creating opportunities for aspiring Native scientists

BY CHRIS WARREN

FROM AN EARLY AGE. Desert Horse-Grant’s primary focus has been helping others. When she was a young girl, her older sister was in a terrible car accident, with injuries debilitating enough that this adult sibling had to move back into the family home on Cape Cod in Massachusetts. “She had 600 stitches across her face and head,” Horse-Grant recalls. But far from shrinking at the sight of her sister’s injuries and pain, Horse-Grant became one of her primary caregivers. “Right from an early age taking care of her was a big thing for me,” she says. “And seeing her get better.”

In retrospect, that early example of selflessness is simply part of a logical continuum in Horse-Grant’s life. These days, Horse-Grant, Oglala Lakota, leads the Brain Tumor Center at the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York City, where she has worked for the past dozen years. “I’ve dedicated the past 12 years to cancer,” she says. “The disease affects everybody and deserves our attention. It’s bigger than science. Fighting it is the perfect mix of community and environment and what we do as a society to live well and make things better.”

Moving the Ball

The time between Horse-Grant’s formative experience of aiding her sister’s convalescence and her arrival at Sloan-Kettering was marked with impressive achievements. As a high school student, she received a grant from the National Institutes of Health to work as an intern studying Lyme disease and mosquito-borne encephalitis at the Harvard School of Public Health’s Spielman Laboratory. Later, as a student at Stanford University, she focused on comparative studies in ethnicity, health status, and policy, particularly as it relates to challenges faced by minorities. When she was still a student Horse-Grant was the director of the Stanford Medical Youth Science Program, which helps high school students from families where nobody has ever gone to college pursue careers in medicine.
Desert Horse-Grant, administrator of the Brain Tumor Center at Sloan-Kettering, is passionate about exposing Native students to scientific opportunities.
All the while Horse-Grant, who has family on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota and found a Native community growing up in Massachusetts with the Algonquin, has focused part of her attention on aiding Native people. While at Stanford, she interned at the Indian Health Service in Washington, D.C., where she briefed then Surgeon General David Satcher on health disparity issues.

More recently, she cofounded the Give K’U Foundation with her sister, Cherése. The foundation provides opportunities for children at Red Shirt Elementary on Pine Ridge. As with so much else in her life and work, Horse-Grant has been particularly interested in helping other Native people because far too many have lacked the academic opportunities she has enjoyed. “I want to give my energy to helping people who haven’t had access to the same resources,” she says. “In so much of the world, unfortunately, it’s who you know. I want to create equalizing opportunities for those who are underrepresented in the sciences and will potentially contribute to our understanding of cancer.”

Growing up with AISES

It would be hard to find someone who has deeper roots in the AISES community. Literally born and raised for the first few years of her life on the Harvard campus in Cambridge, Mass., Horse-Grant had an instant appreciation for the importance of education as well as a tight connection to a surprisingly wide group of other American Indians. “It was the 1970s and my mom was at the campus pursuing a graduate degree in education. Shortly thereafter she worked at MIT, and as a child I started traveling with their chapter to conferences.”

Growing up with an educator, Horse-Grant had an immediate role model when it came to the importance of education. But she did not necessarily have a natural connection to the sciences, which is clearly where her career has led her. For that, Horse-Grant gives some credit to AISES and a memorable summer in junior high. “I went to the AISES summer camp at Clarkson University in upstate New York,” she says. “I got to extract DNA from onions and meet scientists and an astronaut. It was all Native kids interested in science and I loved it.”

Throughout her education — and up through today in her work at Sloan-Kettering — Horse-Grant has maintained that tight connection to AISES. At Stanford University, the American Indian Organization helped cover travel expenses for students to attend AISES meetings and conferences. Horse-Grant says the organization was important for a variety of reasons.

For one thing, AISES provided a common bond that brought together American Indian students through the Give K’U Foundation, Horse-Grant and her sister, Cherése, support children on the Pine Ridge Reservation.
who might otherwise not have a reason to interact academically. “It was one of our biggest unifying groups at Stanford,” she recalls. But the connections that AISES enabled were important on a more practical level. As an undergrad Horse-Grant and others received tutoring from some of the Native students at Stanford’s medical school. “They would mentor us in our really hard classes,” she says. “I am actually lucky enough to be presenting on a panel with one of them at the National Conference this November.”

A Helping Hand
Since Horse-Grant began working at Sloan-Kettering in 2000, she has focused on creating opportunities for Native students there. And from the start, she says, Sloan-Kettering has been supportive of her efforts. “In my second year I asked if the institution would support my trip to the AISES National Conference and the idea of having me being professionally involved with other Natives in the sciences,” she recalls. “And they said yes. So every year for a decade I’ve been going.”

Soon after she started attending conferences on behalf of her employer, Horse-Grant was able to convince Sloan-Kettering’s human resources staff to allow her to set up a career booth so she could spread the word about the opportunities available at the institution. At first, that meant simply encouraging Native undergraduates and medical students to apply to already existing laboratory internship programs in New York. But as she has progressed up the management hierarchy at Sloan-Kettering, Horse-Grant has also sought to cement a more formal relationship between the Brain Tumor Center and AISES. “When I reached a level where I could have my own programs instead of just promoting existing programs, I started a slot for an AISES student specifically,” says Horse-Grant, who notes that the first AISES intern arrived three years ago (see “Research Internship” sidebar).

Paying it Forward
Horse-Grant sees the internship she provides to AISES students as potentially as formative as her experience at that AISES summer camp years ago. “Now we have an intern who will help extract DNA from brain tumors just the way I did with the onion,” she says. “Having that sort of experience available for young people as they are making decisions about what career to pursue is really important.”

Certainly, the internships provide a good picture of the sort of work that goes on at the Sloan-Kettering Brain Tumor Center. Horse-Grant says that students are paired with an MD or PhD who serves as their academic mentor while they’re there. Interns can work on a variety of different research projects — everything from studying

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how the development of a brain tumor in a mouse mimics that of a human to the opportunity to work on preclinical trials. Whatever work they do, Horse-Grant says that the relevance to human health is emphasized. “They may be working with a mouse with a brain tumor, but right across the street we have patients with brain tumors,” she says. “It makes you feel part of the whole human health side of it, even if you’re in a lab.”

One student who took advantage of the internship is Heidi Trenholm. A member of the Cherokee Nation who grew up in Oregon — where she became involved with the Silepz tribal community — Trenholm went to Stanford University. Like Horse-Grant, Trenholm started attending AISES conferences when she was in junior high school, primarily because her mother was committed to Native education and wanted her to be exposed to the opportunities AISES can provide. Trenholm, a biology major, attended an AISES conference in Portland, Ore., where she met Horse-Grant. The internship offered by Sloan-Kettering stood out to Trenholm. “I was drawn to it because most others were engineering focused and I had no background in that,” she says. “When I saw what was available at Sloan-Kettering, it looked perfect.”

After completing the internship at the Brain Tumor Center during the summer after her junior year, Trenholm assumed that would be the end of her experience at Sloan-Kettering. But when her post-graduation plans to join the Peace Corps kept getting pushed back because of the agency’s budgetary problems, she started looking for a job. When she posted a request on her Facebook page about job-hunting suggestions, Horse-Grant got in touch and eventually helped her land a position as a research study assistant.

While she primarily did lab work in her internship, Trenholm now does clinical research for patients. “I’m really happy where I am,” she says. “And I love going to work everyday.” And even though she’s not an intern anymore, Trenholm regularly sees Horse-Grant, whom she regards as a mentor and a person to emulate.”I ask her what I should be doing to move forward in the organization,” she says. “I would like to have a position like hers and follow a similar career trajectory.”

No doubt, Trenholm will continue to get plenty of support from Horse-Grant, who hopes to see more Native young professionals working at Sloan-Kettering. She is particularly keen on helping those who show promise and motivation and simply need an opportunity. “Sometimes in the shade you see flowers growing, and you just know with a little sunlight they would thrive,” she says. “Those are the kids who I feel are great to help because they already have the desire and can imagine what they would accomplish with the tools.”