



BRINGING ATHLETIC TRAINING HOME

EDAC Enhancement Grant recipients discuss the role ATs play in addressing health care needs of native populations

By Samar Long, MEd, AT, ATC, NATA Ethnic Diversity Advisory Committee District Four Representative

Since 2009, the NATA Ethnic Diversity Advisory Committee has awarded more than \$168,600 in Diversity Enhancement Grants to support the advancement of diversity within the athletic training profession.

Marisha Little, LAT, ATC, and Chris Dake, EdD, LAT, ATC, of the University of West Florida athletic training program, received an EDAC Diversity Enhancement Grant in 2018 for their project, “Bridging the Cultural Gap Among Navajo High School Students and the Athletic Training Profession,” which promoted the athletic training profession on the Navajo reservation in Arizona and New Mexico to increase the number of ethnically diverse athletic trainers.

“Educating the high school students was important because, in my culture, there is a big emphasis on getting an education – in fact, the saying that comes from my culture is ‘go and climb the ladder,’ which means, ‘get an education, advance and bring what you learned back to the reservation,’” Little said. “Even though we are teaching that, because of the remote area of the desert location, Diné [Navajos] specifically, it’s just really difficult to get any type of resources there.”

Through the project’s educational sessions and workshops, 50 high school students – 86 percent of whom identified as American Indian – were given a chance to learn about and practice different athletic training clinical skills. Survey results prior to and after these activities showed that the students had a deeper understanding, respect and interest in the profession with many expressing interest in learning more about becoming an athletic trainer.

The UWF team recently received a second EDAC Diversity Enhancement Grant to continue these efforts through the project, “Advancing Athletic Training Education on the Navajo Reservation.”

EDAC District Four Rep. Samar Long, MEd, AT, ATC, sat down with Little and Dake to discuss their grant projects and cultural competency.

SAMAR LONG: Can you tell us about the grant project you created and what prompted you to start this project?

MARISHA LITTLE: We started the grant project because one of my lifelong goals was to return home and contribute to my tribe and people in some way. I feel passionate about athletic training, and I’m also passionate about my people and where I come from. So the thought of going back and doing some type of project to improve the lives of the students in my community was really the kick-starter to all of this grant work.

The first grant we received was when I was only a student and I didn’t know how I was going to be able to do any of this work. During one of our presentations at the university, I was relaying


University of West Florida students Ashley Covington, Kelsey Vondenstein and Ignacio Barajas and UWF clinical coordinator Chris Dake, EdD, LAT, ATC, visited the Painted Desert and Petrified Forest National Park in Arizona during their trip to the Navajo reservation. The group, including Marisha Little, LAT, ATC, visited the reservation to conduct the project “Bridging the Cultural Gap Among Navajo High School Students and the Athletic Training Profession,” funded by an NATA Ethnic Diversity Advisory Committee Diversity Enhancement Grant.

to my class and to Dr. Dake some of my goals for athletic training. I mentioned that I saw some grants on the NATA website from EDAC, and I would love to apply, but I didn’t really know how. And he jumped right on the bandwagon with me to make it happen.

CHRIS DAKE: When we started looking at the grant itself and how Marisha could apply for it, we realized that you had to have a certified NATA member on the grant or as the primary investigator. So initially she said, “Well, I can’t do it.” I said, “Oh, sure you can. We’ll just figure it out.” From idea inception to applying, it was a very quick turnaround. We worked quite diligently for a short period of time to formulate our idea and put it on paper. It didn’t give us time to overthink anything – we just had to get it together in order to get the proposal submitted.

LONG: That’s awesome that you had the support to get the initial project off the ground. Can you give us a little bit of context about the first grant?

LITTLE: One of the things we identified pretty quickly was that there’s not a lot of



communities on the reservation that had any exposure to an athletic trainer, so we knew coming in we would have to do a lot of promotion of the profession. The grant that we actually received was a category one grant, where the end goal is to increase the amount of ethnically diverse athletic trainers, so we decided that we would base our project around promoting the profession. We felt within the high school setting might be a good place to start because Native Americans, or at least Navajos (*Diné*), hold sports in really high regard, especially basketball. We felt that mixing their love of basketball and love of sports with promoting the profession would be a good idea.

LONG: What prompted you to do a second grant?

LITTLE: The second grant came around because we had such good feedback from the first grant and the students really enjoyed it. We had an entire class write us letters explaining what they learned. In their own words, students told us how much they appreciated us coming out and spending time with them. It was something new for them to experience, and they don't really have a lot of new experiences out on the reservation. We even had interest from a medical community that wanted us to come out and do a presentation about how they could best utilize an athletic trainer within their organization.

DAKE: There are so many things that haven't been tapped into as far as research goes because it's not accessible there. So in order to get a larger grant, you have to have the data to support doing it. The first grant was just to establish what knowledge there is about athletic training, and a cool byproduct was one of the classes we went to, they taught a lesson on athletic training so even the teacher was researching what an athletic trainer is. There's so many avenues to expand into because I didn't know that athletic trainers in the smaller colleges on the reservation and the hospitals aren't using athletic trainers, and all of that information drove the second grant. We took a year between grants just trying to figure out what we want to hone in on to keep moving forward.

LONG: Please share your thoughts about some expectations and norms someone

coming into an Indigenous community should be aware of. I say this knowing that no community is a monolith and there more than 500 recognized tribes, and more unrecognized, but I believe ATs want to build that rapport for a patient-provider relationship.

LITTLE: I actually am really appreciative that you said that because it's important to me to say that oftentimes Native American tribes get all lumped together under the title of "Native American" or "American Indians." I think while we're all proud to be native, it's sometimes misconstrued that all of our tribes are the same. You know the Hopi, Apache, Sioux, Yaqui, Kiowa – they're all rich in culture and have different languages, practices and traditional medicine. Although I think there are similarities among us, the essence of each tribe is different.

I can't speak for all the tribes, but I can do my best to tell you what it is to be a *Diné* woman. This is why it is so important for us to introduce ourselves in the traditional manner (see the accompanying sidebar on p. 14). The Navajo introduction is a way to tell others how we identify. My grandma used to tell me all the time that you're never alone because you have family from all over; you just have to make it known who you are.

I think that plays a big role in the strong community bond because these clan systems are big. It's not just clans of only 10 people – there are hundreds, probably thousands of people who have the same clan, and family is going to be a huge aspect of these cultures. Forming a bond like that also means that you're going to have a stronger support system, and it's going to bind the community together.

LONG: Since we are discussing the importance of community, can you speak more about the role of family?

LITTLE: I think one of the similarities you're going to see across a lot of tribes is that we hold our elders in extremely high regard and the importance of this whole family bond. It's important to realize that many of these cultures are matrilineal. Navajo women have a lot of responsibility. We have a responsibility to keep our culture alive. We also have a responsibility for the well-being of our family, community and people. It's very common

to see that the mother is going to be the one who's making a lot of the decisions. Also, extended families are considered immediate families; your aunts are your mothers, and your cousins are your brothers and sisters.

When you go into working with somebody from a medical professional standpoint, you're probably going to be dealing with a much larger family unit than what you're used to. And you need to realize that if the mother and grandmother are there, they're going to have a lot of say in what is happening.

For the Navajos, at least, there's a very strong tie to our ancestral homeland. For us that's *Diné Bikéyah'*, which means Navajo land, which was given to us by the Holy People and marked by four sacred mountains. It gives us a boundary of where, in that area, we will be protected and prosperous. If you have people get hurt off the reservation or they're living away, that might play a role in treatment because they would probably rather be home versus doing rehabilitation somewhere else.

In the Navajo community, we see our whole culture is built around the idea of *Hózhó*, which in English means living in harmony or beauty. This approach to life is something I think we can share across other cultures as well, since a lot of Native American communities often think of health in a holistic manner. You'll often see health or life in a circular pattern. So in the Navajo culture, if one area of your life is in disorder, it's going to affect all other areas and that has to be fixed before you can move on to the next area.

LONG: I also have close ties to my family so I relate to what you are saying, but some people are not as close with their family traditions or customs. Can you tell us a little bit about how important it is for athletic trainers, whether your peer is a native person or your patient, to recognize the importance of preserving culture, customs and rituals? For example, realizing there may be a different response to a death in a family as we should not expect them to only take a day or two off to grieve and get back to work or practice.

LITTLE: I think everybody would like to have their culture be respected and known. There are

GET TO KNOW THE RESEARCHERS



MARISHA LITTLE, LAT, ATC

Yá'át'ééh shí k'é dóó shí din'é. Shí éí Marisha Little yinishyé.

Tsí'naajinii nishlį́. Dóó Bilagáana bashishchiin. Áádóó Áshjjihi eii dashicheii. Dóó Bilagáana eii dashinalí. Łichíí' deez áhí déé'naashá. Ákótéego éí Diné 'asdzání nishlį́.

Hello, my family and my people.

My name is Marisha Little. I am of the Black Streak Forest People Clan and born for the Caucasians. My maternal grandfather is the Salt Clan and my paternal grandfather is also Caucasian. I am from Sanders, Arizona. In this way, I am a Navajo woman.

Marisha Little, LAT, ATC, currently works as the graduate assistant to the University of West Florida athletic training program and as a PRN athletic trainer in the sports medicine outreach department of Andrews Institute. She graduated with her bachelor's degree in athletic training from the University of West

Florida and is currently working on her master's degree in health promotion. She is a recipient of the Bobby Gunn Student Leadership Award from the SEATA, the Legacy Scholarship of the Athletic Trainers' Association of Florida and the Memorial Scholarship of SEATA. Little served on the NATA Student Leadership Committee from 2018-19 and currently serves on the ATAF Public Relations and Marketing Committee.



CHRIS DAKE, EdD, LAT, ATC

Chris Dake, EdD, LAT, ATC, has been at the University of West Florida since 2009. First, he served a dual role as the head athletic trainer and the athletic training program's clinical education coordinator. Since 2013, he is working full-time as the athletic training program's clinical education coordinator. As the clinical education coordinator, he also teaches several athletic training courses and mentors athletic training students.

Before starting at UWF, Dake was an assistant athletic trainer and instructor with Carson-Newman College and worked primarily with baseball and soccer teams. He started his professional career with high schools in Virginia and Tennessee working for Northside High School and Westmoreland High School, respectively. Dake is a graduate of UWF, Morehead State University and Tennessee Technological University.

definitely some things I can see from the Navajo culture that would have different expectations. For a more traditional Navajo family, there's certain things you can and can't do, especially for those families living on the reservation.

I think something the area surrounding the Navajo reservation does really well is being very knowledgeable about those things. For example, you won't see a lot Navajos – I'm not sure if this is for all Native American tribes or not – going out during an eclipse, and that is accepted there very readily. Or, like you said, there's certain traditional practices when people pass away. For the most part, in that area, it's all very accepted because they're knowledgeable and they understand the culture.

If you're not familiar with the culture, that could cause an issue, and, in that case, we all have a responsibility to each other to understand the differences in our cultures. You may need to be a little bit more accepting and a willing listener. Be willing to learn about the differences in these cultures. I think that makes the world a better place.

LONG: I know there's a lot of information online to learn more about different cultures. Are there any sources you would specifically recommend if someone is moving closer to a reservation? Or should you learn from the people?

LITTLE: Like you said originally, there's so many different tribes and we each have our own culture and way of communicating things. I think, honestly, there's a lot of people, if you are willing to learn and you want to know more about their culture, who are willing to teach. Not just Native Americans, but everybody wants to be understood. If you have a genuine interest to learn and find a family or a person who's willing to teach you, then that would be my biggest suggestion.

One thing an AT going to a native community should understand is the need to collaborate with traditional healers. Many families will want to use their traditional healer. In my culture, a medicine man is called a *Hatahii*. Building a relationship with both the patients and the healers will provide the best health care for our patients.

DAKE: When I was a clinical athletic trainer, and I saw other athletic trainers do this, which is getting really ingrained in whatever community



The UWF project featured a rehabilitation clinical skills lab, during which researchers, including Barajas, gave students more insight into the athletic training profession.

you're in. If you work with tennis and the majority of your team are international students, you have to learn about those different cultures as part of what you do. If you're going to go work somewhere like on a reservation, then you have to be a little bit open minded about it. You're going to learn what the different cultural events are and how things like deaths are handled, and then you just embrace it and be a good neighbor. Understanding that, for everybody, the place they came from is just as important to them as where you came from is important to you.

I spent a lot of time with Marisha and looking on websites because I didn't want to do something offensive while I was on the Navajo reservation. If you go in with the open mind and the willingness to learn a little bit, then most will accept you. Not everybody talked to me because I think there's still that negative connotation with some people who don't know me. There's places you go that you're not completely accepted right away. Just keep an open mind, embrace it, be a good neighbor and offer to help/give back.

Also, you're working with their kids and athletes, who are cornerstones to every community, and that helps make you a part of the community right away.

LONG: Would you like to comment on what you think is important for ATs to understand about life on the reservation and how things like a pandemic can affect your people?

LITTLE: A major concern is lack of niceties, like running water, which the tribal government is working to correct. Since a lot of families don't have running water, they haul their water

from wells for the family and livestock. It's really grueling to haul water back and forth. Now with the COVID-19 pandemic, everyone says wash your hands frequently, but that gets difficult because now you have to keep hauling water. And you'll often see a lot of multi-generational families living in one house. Social distancing is going to be difficult. If one person in your family has it, it can spread to everybody else in your household.

LONG: Advocating and being an ally is very important, especially regarding health disparities. Are there any advocacy groups you would like to mention that we can learn more about action happening in your community?

LITTLE: There are several actually. One group called Light Up Navajo is working to expand the electrical poles out to the reservation. A very new initiative, called Missing and Murdered Diné Relatives, that I'm very passionate about is advocating for families who had murdered or missing Indigenous women from their families. Another is called The Navajo Water Project, which is similar to Light Up Navajo. There are also several COVID-19 relief funds that are available.

DAKE: The Navajo Nation Reservation has a really nice tribal government website that has several additional resources. I was able to find a lot of information.

LITTLE: It's not that there haven't been efforts to help improve living on the reservation. I think that they are just overwhelmed with the amount of disparities that are present that it's difficult to start to get a handle on it without coming at it from all angles.

BONUS BLOG CONTENT

The interview continues on the NATA Now blog. Visit www.nata.org/blog to hear more from Marisha Little, LAT, ATC, and Chris Dake, EdD, LAT, ATC.

LONG: What changes have you seen in reservation life?

LITTLE: The health care system has gotten better since I was a kid, but the hospital systems are still not very accessible. There are main hospitals scattered throughout the reservation. A lot of families live hours out from the hospital, and access can be difficult for them. I say all these things about my culture, trying to highlight the fact that there are a lot of health disparities. At the same time, I'm coming from a place that is not to incite pity, but so you know that my tribe is so resilient. It's not very common to hear them complain about what is happening. They are like an athletic trainer: super adaptable and able to overcome a lot of these obstacles, even without all the extra niceties available in other places in the United States. I think they just all naturally have this inherent mindset that they'll overcome.

LONG: Is there any additional information you think might be important to share?

LITTLE: I just really like to reiterate that for Native Americans, our culture is so important to us and a huge part of who we are as people and as individuals. Our best quality is that we are so resilient to what is happening around us, and that will continue. We will continue to live and thrive with whatever is given to us. We have a unique sense of culture; we have a unique language; we have a strong tie to family, strong tie to where we come from; and I don't want that to be to be overlooked.

I would also like to thank the audience for reading through the entire article. Promoting native athletic trainers and our work on the reservation is so important to us, and the more people we reach, I believe, the bigger impact we can make.

Ahéhee'. (Thank you).

For more information, contact Little at mrl141@students.uwf.edu. §