

Lonasee serves as role model to Native American students



Recently, Shawn Lonasee shared his successes at the Navajo Preparatory School's career fair. Being a Native American himself, Lonasee stood out at the Farmington, N.M., school event.

"I think I did turn a couple of heads with my presence there," he said. "They saw that a Native American could actually be part of a business that I am in."

Two years ago, Lonasee was hired by the NASA Johnson Space Center White Sands Test Facility (WSTF) in Las Cruces, N.M., as a mechanical engineer employed by Honeywell Technology Solutions. He works on special projects in the WSTF Propulsion Department, where he is

currently engaged in storage life testing on the U. S. Air Force's Minuteman propulsion system.

In addition to Lonasee, other residents of the Zuni Pueblo, including other WSTF employees and students from New Mexico State University (NMSU), also attended the job fair.

"I always was interested in taking things apart, especially anything with moving parts," Lonasee said. "So, I wanted to talk to students about pursuing their own interests. I think it's important that students decide what they want to do by middle school."

To spark that interest, Lonasee spoke at three different sessions. He talked about math courses and engineering degrees. He also showed a WSTF promotional video and answered the students' questions.

"Yes, it's worth it!" he told students. "It's worth all the hard work of going to school. Attend summer programs offered by the schools. Don't be stuck at home. Get used to the idea of leaving home, so you don't feel that you can't make it and are forced to come back."

But Lonasee does want to return to the Zuni Pueblo someday – voluntarily – so he can use the knowledge and skills he has acquired to benefit his Native American community.

"It was hard going to college. I joined the American Indian Program at NMSU. I had to adjust to being alone and did that by associating with people who were in the same position as I," he said. "I started to work with others in this support program. I would make copies, phone calls and arrange for tutoring, mentoring, or computer counseling for them. I also worked as an intramural activities coordinator for two-and-a-half years."

Lonasee stressed to the students that it is essential to plan for the future. "I wanted to tell the students to take advantage of the summer programs and see everything out there before they head off to college without knowing what they want to be," he said.

If they don't plan, the future might not be so bright. "It's a struggle. I've seen friends and relatives dead-ended after high school with no vision, goals or plans for further education," he said. "I was determined that I wouldn't go that route. I wanted to be a real benefit to my family."

Lonasee wishes to continue to mentor his community. Recently, he called his fifth grade teacher, Cecilia Einfalt, about establishing a career day where parents are invited too. Lonasee believes the career fair has great potential for parents to envision opportunities for their children. This will, in turn, bring the opportunities and experiences back to the community to benefit all.

Lonasee believes family support is a key to success. "Parental support was a very positive thing for me," he said, "and I want to foster better trust between parents, teachers and kids." ❖

Searching for the Middle Place

A CLOSER LOOK

When Shawn Lonasee visited the Navajo Preparatory School, his talk wasn't strictly about his work at WSTF. He also told of his roots.

"My home is two hours west of Albuquerque, 30 miles south of Gallup, near the Arizona border in the Zuni Pueblo," he said.

Lonasee explained to the student his pueblo's origin. "Once upon a time a big flood occurred in our pueblo, and a sea serpent appeared. He demanded sacrifices. Food was offered to the serpent, but he demanded human sacrifices," he said. "A small boy and girl were sacrificed. They walked into the water and drowned, but when the water receded, their images were found as if recreated in stone. Our pueblo was built in the shadow of this beautiful stone formation."

Lonasee then told the students how his ancestors came to establish the Zuni Pueblo. "We originated in the Grand Canyon, but our people were always walking and searching for what they called the Middle Place," he said. "The people were offered two eggs to decide where the Middle Place was. A beautiful egg and a plain, rather drab, egg were offered to us. Our people became divided, with some choosing the beautiful egg and others the plain one."

He then told the students what happened to the two groups. "Those that chose the colorful egg moved south. Today, we believe that they reside in the rain forests of South America. Their symbol became the colorful parrot," he said. "Those that chose the drab egg remained in the area and founded the Zuni Pueblo. The drab egg hatched into a Raven, which is a Zuni symbol of intelligence. We stayed in the area. We found our Middle Place."

Today, most members of the Zuni Pueblo make their living as silversmiths, artists, potters or as ceremonial weavers. The 10,000 inhabitants of the pueblo are centralized in a 3-square-mile valley, created by mesas and forested mountains.

