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Alumni Profile

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Healing hands

Janelle Brown '85 was 19 the first time she set foot on an Indian reservation.

Surrounded by Hopi children in Keam's Canyon, Ariz., as part of a Linfield College January Term experience, she became fascinated by the juxtaposition of traditional homes, costumes and customs in a modern world. The month proved a precursor for her future. Today, as a pediatrician on the White Mountain Apache Reservation, Brown's career is devoted to caring for children.

From their home in Pinetop, nestled in the snow-laced mountains of eastern Arizona, Brown and her husband, John Bratsch, also a pediatrician, tag team between their roles as doctors and parents. They have two daughters and share 1.5 positions at Whiteriver Hospital, each working part time.

In 1996, the young couple signed on for a two-year stint at the hospital with Indian Health Service, the federal health program for American Indians and Alaska natives. Fifteen years later, the Brown-Bratsch family remains enamored of the co-workers and the reservation community.

"The community has been welcoming," said Brown, whose two daughters were born while they lived on the reservation. "Even if you're from different cultures, having kids binds you."

The shared position comes naturally to husband and wife. They met during their residency and work well together. "It's been perfect for us," she said. "We sometimes deal with tragic events, and we both understand how hard that is. I call him for advice and he does the same."

Brown has become accustomed to some of the

challenges of working on an Indian reservation, including language and cultural differences which impact advance directives and other issues surrounding death.

"Culturally, you're not supposed to talk about death," she said. "The language can also be a challenge. Some of the elders only speak Apache."

The shared position gives them more time to spend with family, which is crucial for stress relief. Grinding poverty, crowded living conditions and cultural depression lead to illness and high rates of suicide among tribal members.

"The Apache people have been put on reservations and denied the rights they should have had," Brown said. "That historical trauma gets into a person's psyche and permeates their day-to-day existence, which then affects their health."

William Apel, professor emeritus of religious studies, organized that first volunteer trip back in 1984 and remembers Brown's self-initiative and courage. In fact, his grade book lists Brown as earning one of only two A's in his religious studies class.

"Her final grade of A is in red ink and bolder than any other of the course grades for other students," Apel said. "This shows how impressed I was with Janelle's work. Over 36 years, I have only highlighted a final grade in my grade books three or four times."

A pianist, Brown minored in music at Linfield and sang in the choir. Her honors thesis, "Healthcare for America's Poor," gave her insight about working with a poor population. And a study abroad experience in Austria prepared her to work with other cultures by increasing her flexibility, she said.

"When you are in another culture, you realize there are other ways to think about and do things," she said. "Going overseas and working with a different culture gave me a hunger to do that again."

After Linfield, Brown completed medical school at Oregon Health & Science University, a residency in pediatrics in New Mexico and a four-year stint in the Air Force before arriving at Whiteriver. Brown considers it an honor to work with the White Mountain Apache community.

"It is a privilege to be invited into the lives of families, to share their joys and be with them in their sorrows, and I am grateful each day for the job that I have," she said. 🍷



Janelle Brown '85, a pediatrician on the White Mountain Apache Reservation, said her small science classes at Linfield fostered strong relationships, something that remains important to her work in the medical field.

— Laura Davis