



THE NAVAJO NATION

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT & VICE PRESIDENT

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Navajo President Joe Shirley, Jr., offers encouragement to Native American students at University of Arizona

TUCSON, Ariz. – Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley, Jr., delivered a message of encouragement, compassion, hope and empathy to help ease the unspoken anguish of some 200 Navajo and Native American students at the University of Arizona on Thursday, a week after the tragic death of freshman Navajo student Mia Henderson of Tuba City.

He was accompanied to the gathering in the Student Union South Ballroom by University of Arizona President Robert Shelton, Navajo Nation First Lady Vikki Shirley and newly-crowned Miss Navajo Nation 2007-2008 Jonathea Tso of Cove, Ariz.

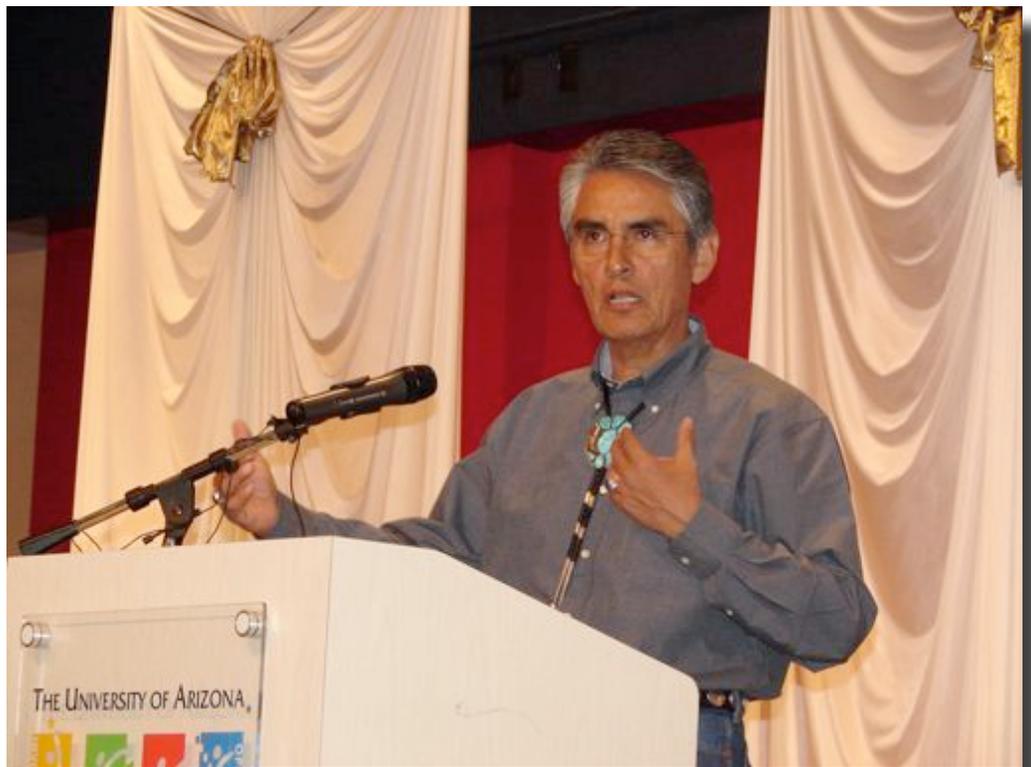
In a heartfelt, 35-minute talk with references to Navajo teachings and Biblical scripture, President Shirley told the students that despite the immensity of the tragedy and the depth of their pain, the wisdom of Navajo elders would encourage them to move forward and move beyond it.

"We cannot continue to dwell on it. We have to move on," the President said. "This is a great teaching from the elders. I'm sure some of you have heard it. A great teaching from our medicine people, from some of the leaders that we had in times past and some of the leaders that we have today. What happened has happened. It's very unfortunate. It hurts. It makes us cry. It makes us think about a lot of things. But the truth of the matter is, to the best of our ability, spiritually speaking, we have to try to get it behind us and move on. Continue to move forward."

The President said that in situations like this, no one can explain why things happen.

"The truth is, there are no answers to why it happened," he said. "We cannot dwell on it."

The President also told the students that nothing should sway them from their goal to obtain their educations because they



Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley, Jr., addressed about 200 Native American students at the University of Arizona and encouraged them to persevere toward their goals despite the pain and hurt they feel.

must prepare for the future, for their families and for the communities will need them.

"Do not let anything deter you from your goals, which is getting an education," he said. "There are no impossibilities. Now is the time to have faith. Our elders teach that, that there are no impossibilities."

In the Navajo language, he told the students to never think that they can't do it or that they can't succeed.

"You need to stay with it. It can be done. You can do it," he said. "That's the way you should think. That's the way you should believe because you are Navajo. That's our teaching. That's our culture. That's our way of life. That's who we are. And because of that, we've come a long ways in spite of the atrocities that we came through."

President Shirley said that he wanted to share some of himself with the students, saying that he knows what it's like to lose a loved one. He said he lost his grandmother who raised him from the time he was one year old. He said he's lost his father, his mother, a brother, a sister, a son, and friends.



Miss Navajo Nation Jonathea Tso of Cove accompanied President Shirley for the first time since being crowned to the University of Arizona.

In 2001, his 29-year-old daughter, Tona-Vee Paymella-Shirley, a mother of four who was working on her master's degree at Northern Arizona University, was killed by a drunk driver.

"She was just as happy as happy can be, just enjoying life, wanting to get at life, that's how she was," he said. "Next thing we know, we get a call. Sorry to tell you, she was killed by a drunk driver. So I know what it's like to lose a loved one."

Despite the immeasurable sadness in their lives, the family resolved to go on, to live for their other children, their jobs, the communities they served and the Navajo Nation, and he encouraged the students to do the same.

"Look to yourself for strength," he said. "Look to the Nation for strength. Look to who you are for strength."

"Life is bigger than all of us. We can only do the best we can to be here, to be a part of it. There are many questions in life, and few answers," he said.

At the conclusion of his talk, President Shirley sang a Navajo protection song.

"It's our teaching. It's our way of life. It's who we are," he said. "In our way of life there's no doomsday. There's only that life

as we know it is changing and we must continue to get ourselves ready for it," he said.



Students were eager to get a photograph of themselves with President and First Lady Shirley.

"Our elders have taught us that there are many challenges in life, that there are many challenges along life's journey, and you've got to be ready for it," he said. "They said to get to know hunger. They said to get to know thirst. They said to get to know fatigue, jealousy and greed. We've got to get to know these monsters, these plagues, these challenges, and to try to get ready the best way we know how."

President Shelton thanked Mrs. Shirley and the President for their visit, saying his presence was a comfort to the university community during this time of sadness and grieving. When it was over, a sense of greater happiness pervaded the room.

"But is also a time for all of our communities at the University of Arizona to come together to support each other, to pray, each in our own way, for healing, for understanding, for kindness, for calm. It's time for all of the students to utilize every resource that this university community can bring to you as you, in your own individual way, come to grips with the situation."

Nicholas Taylor, a 20-year-old junior from Fort Defiance, told reporter Eric Swedlund of the Arizona Daily Star that President Shirley's visit was important for students, many whom live far from home and have a difficult time adjusting to college.

"Down here you live in two worlds and you have to try to maintain balance," Mr. Taylor is quoted as saying. "It's good he came down here to remind students who don't often get back to the homeland of the teachings. He spoke like a true Navajo."

"It's impossible to overstate the importance of his time here," President Robert Shelton told Mr. Swedlund. "His 10 words mean more than a thousand I could speak. He's sending a message to all of our Native American students that we're here to support them. While we may never make sense of this, we each in our own way have to move on."

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