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Press Contact:

Carl Slater, Senior Public Information Officer
(505) 371-8395 – cslater@navajodot.org

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Navajo DOT Engineer Earns Spot on National Youth Environmental Work Group

March 17, Tse Bonito – **Kayla DeVault**, a project engineer for the Ft. Defiance Agency with the **Navajo Division of Transportation** (Navajo DOT), was named one of fifteen members of the **Youth Perspectives on Climate Justice Work Group**, an advisory subgroup of the **National Environmental Justice Advisory Council**, today. The council, established in 1993, “provides advice and recommendations about broad, cross-cutting issues related to environmental justice” to the **US Environmental Protection Agency** (US EPA). Ms. DeVault wishes to share her “global experiences and indigenous background to press as much change into how we treat the planet as [she] can.”

The Administrator of the US EPA, **Gina McCarthy**, announced the selections at a meeting of the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council in Gulfport, MS.

While Ms. DeVault is a recent addition to the Navajo DOT staff, starting work this past August, she has already established herself as substantive contributor to the division’s efforts to develop the Navajo Nation’s infrastructure network. She’s brought a wealth of knowledge from



Kayla DeVault stands in front of the Navajo Transportation Complex in Tse Bonito, NM. The complex serves as Navajo DOT’s headquarters, where Ms. DeVault is an engineer.

projects she’s worked on in other rural locations around the world.

Navajo DOT Division Director Garret Silversmith, upon hearing the news of Ms. DeVault’s honor, issued the following statement, “Navajo DOT is pleased and supportive of Ms. DeVault recently being named to the Youth Perspectives on Climate Justice Work Group. Furthermore, Ms. DeVault has been a wonderful addition to our transportation program and in the short time she has been employed here her contributions and insight to our recent and upcoming projects have been valuable and meaningful.”

Ms. DeVault, who grew up in rural southwestern Pennsylvania, is an enrolled member of the **Shawnee Tribe** and is also **Anishinaabe**. Growing up without a local

Native community, she didn’t begin advocating for Native American issues until she began her university studies.

In August 2013 she graduated from **Case Western Reserve University** with a B.S. in Civil Engineering, concentrating on a Geo-Environmental specialty. Over the course of her university career Kayla developed an interest in using her technical knowledge to help historically disadvantaged populations, especially tribes in the Great Lakes region.

Two university research projects set the template for her future career. While completing an independent study and internship, Ms. DeVault worked on a model that could be deployed by Great Lakes tribes to exploit their lake wind resources.

Additionally, Ms. DeVault was a research assistant

to a professor who sought to create an international database of soils standards, including American Indian tribes and Alaskan Native corporations. Treating tribes as coequals with other sovereigns was foundational to her approach to future engineering and environmental justice work.

As a part of her research into soils standards, Ms. DeVault learned that the vast majority of federally-recognized landholding tribes do not have environmental programs with independent soils standards that can be used for projects such brownfields remediation. Too often, she learned, tribes were offered opportunities, such as holding a landfill, but were never given the resources to remediate the land to their own standards. One of the reasons she was attracted to work for the Navajo Nation was the nation’s independent Environmental Protection Agency and internal mitigation processes.

Her understanding of the disparity between how tribes improve the quality of life of their citizens and hold fast to tribal values, like sound land stewardship, was only heightened when she expanded her experience to Engineers Without Borders. Combining academic study and language immersion in

Ni'hoosdzáán baa'áhwiilyąągo nát'ąą' nihaa'ánáhálya.

*When we take care of the earth,
mutually she takes care of us.*

West Africa with clean water delivery projects, Ms. DeVault saw firsthand how non-governmental organizations' projects often fail because they neglect to incorporate their projects into tribal and cultural structures.

In her final summer in school Ms. DeVault traveled to India to work with holistic programs that support urban indigenous populations. Whereas the organizations' aims are diverse—some focus on poverty and education, while others focus on creating opportunities for orphans and abuse victims—they all seek to incorporate their goals into the traditional cultural practices and norms of the people with whom they work. Inspired by their approaches, Ms. DeVault is currently working on climate adaptation and sustainability projects on Navajo.

She recognizes that in order to create long lasting programs that will make a significant impact over time she must immerse herself in Navajo culture, language, and philosophy. Accordingly, she is pursuing an A.A. in Navajo Studies at Diné College. With this knowledge, Ms. DeVault is working to create a hybrid organization that combines traditional knowledge in the context of an organization like Engineers Without Borders. Currently, the nascent organization is working with American Indian Science and

Engineering Society (AISES) student and professional chapters.

Furthermore, Ms. DeVault was instrumental in the acquisition of the division's first soils lab. The lab allows the division to test the soils at potential project locations as well as the quality of materials ordered for projects. Though the soils lab may seem like a small and unappealing piece of equipment relative to a grader, its operation is one of the fundamental steps that Navajo DOT must take in order for the nation to fully assert its sovereignty and create a first rate division of transportation.

The soils lab's acquisition is emblematic of the question that Ms. DeVault has been trying to answer in her young career—the same reason she was selected as a member of the youth working group: How can government and non-government organizations align incentives along traditional frameworks to achieve quality of life improvements that respect and honor sacred traditions. The goal in quality of life improvements isn't to replace the traditional ways of living. The goal is to create a sustainable balance and harmony between traditional practices and economic, educational, and quality of life improvements. And while environmental stewardship may be a

constant across indigenous nations, each group has their own way of pursuing their goals.

Kayla DeVault is a **Sequoyah Fellow**, an honor of lifetime AISES membership that recognizes her commitment to the STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and math) and to the American Indian community.

She accepted the **White House's Generation Indigenous Challenge** and was invited to the **White House Tribal Youth Gathering**. Later she was asked to speak as a representative of indigenous youth at the **2nd Universal Periodic Review of the US** in Geneva opposite then-**Assistant Secretary of the Interior Kevin Washburn**. In 2014, Ms. DeVault won a gold medal in Hong Kong as a member of the **Team USA** Inline Hockey program.