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THE NAVAJO NATION

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Navajo President Joe Shirley, Jr., speaks to students at Page Middle School for Native American Heritage Month

PAGE, Ariz. – Some 700 students greeted a surprised Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley, Jr., with cheers and applause as he entered the Page Middle School Gymnasium on Monday, Nov. 7, to speak about the value of Native American Heritage Month.



Navajo President Joe Shirley, Jr., speaks to 700 students at the Page Middle School about the importance of obtaining their educations and holding on to their Navajo culture. About 75 percent of the students are Navajo.

The President had come at the invitation of Dean of Students Allen Tsinigine expecting to talk to a class rather than the entire school.

He told the 6th, 7th and 8th grade students of the importance of working hard to get their high school diplomas but not stopping there. He urged them to go on to college to achieve real personal independence and to prepare themselves to help their communities.

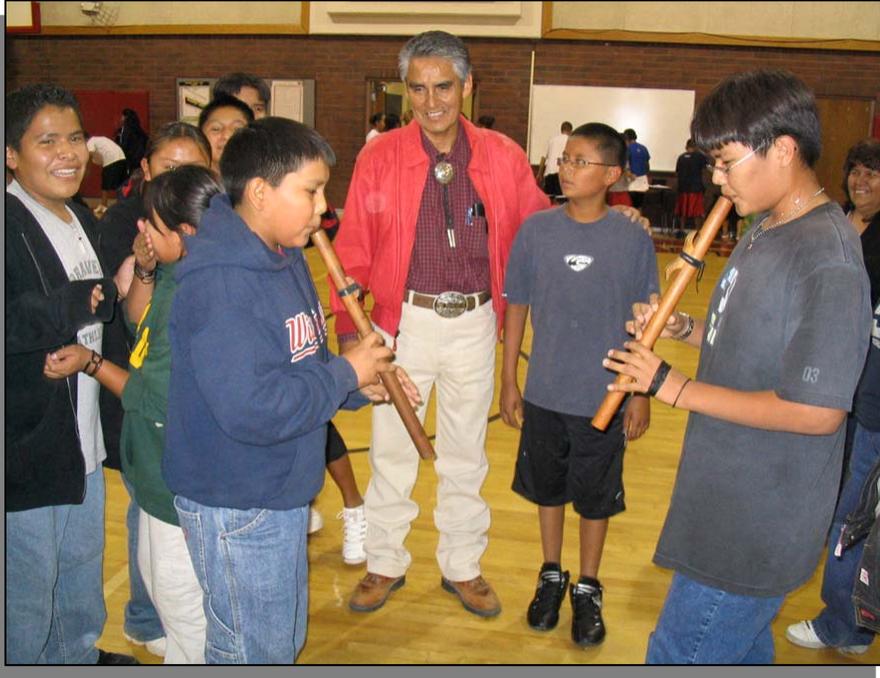
“The important thing is getting there,” the President said. “Don’t let anything get in your way.”

College may be harder than high school, the President said.

“It’s a little bit tougher,” he added. “You’ll have to use a little bit more of your knowledge, a little bit more of your wits to get through.”

So he encouraged them to start setting their goals now and to think about college. He explained that there are a lot of people supporting and backing each one of them, from their parents and grandparents to their teachers in school.

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Performing for President Shirley is Raynor Cooke, left, and E.J. Flores, who is president of the Page Middle School Native American Club. Both are 7th graders.

“When I was one year old, I was given to my grandma,” the President said. “She’s the one who raised me. There’s a lot of love there. She’s got a lot of love for you.”

With that kind of support for them, there is no reason why they can’t achieve all they want to, he said.

He explained that true independence and personal sovereignty requires that they obtain their education in order to get a good-paying job. A good job will provide them with an income that will allow them to have their own home and transportation.

An income, home of their own and transportation will mean they are not dependent on anyone, he said, whether it’s parents, grandparents or any kind of government. That alone will allow them to become a contributing member of society, which should be everyone’s goal.

“A lot of what education is about is standing on your own two feet, getting out there on your own,” he said. “If you have a little bit left over, share it with momma and poppa. Help your grandparents.”

Revealing much from his personal life, the President told the students he struck out on his own at 16 and earned his associate’s, bachelor’s and master’s degrees, deciding to become a professional social worker because of his desire to help people.

Some years prior to becoming President, he was director of the Navajo Division of Social Services.

“You do it because you love people,” he said. “I like helping and that’s a good position to find yourself in.”

He gave the students some of his secrets for success; always look people in the eye, sit in the front row, ask a lot of questions, do your homework and don’t forget to turn it in on time.

“It doesn’t matter how big another person is – millionaires, billionaires,” he said.

Once a person is educated and working, they’re prepared to give back to the community that supported them along the way, he said, whether it’s a town, chapter, the Navajo Nation or the country.

“The world needs help,” the President said. “Don’t forget your roots. Learn your language. Start speaking Navajo. There are a lot of sacred stories, even to get at riches. There are lots of secrets. We’re a proud people. If you can go for it, you can make a name for yourself.”

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