



**The Navajo Nation**  
Yideeskáadi Nitsáhákees

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## Navajo President Buu Nygren welcomes Netflix film *Rez Ball*, director Sydney Freeland home to Navajo Nation

**WINDOW ROCK, Ariz.** – It's been 19 months since Emmy-nominated film and TV writer-director Sydney Freeland visited Navajo Nation President Buu Nygren to tell him about her latest project: the Netflix production of *Rez Ball*.

Next week, millions across the country will know the story when the movie opens on Netflix Sept. 27.

"Kids across the Navajo Nation just like me grew up shooting hoops on sandy ground dreaming of future glory on their high school courts," President Nygren said. "From isolated sheep camps where a log holds up a hoop to state basketball championships in Phoenix and Albuquerque surrounded by a sea of brown faces, basketball is how passion is defined by generations of Navajo boys, girls and their parents watching them bring home trophies year after year. Now Sydney has captured all of that feeling in her wonderful film."

Produced by four-time NBA champion and basketball great LeBron James' production firm, SpringHill Company, *Rez Ball* began with casting calls for Navajo and Native actors in February and March 2023.

The story is about a Navajo high school basketball team named the Chuska Warriors from the fictional town of Chuska, N.M. Its players are fighting to overcome their grief following the death of their star player Nataanii Jackson, played by actor Kusem Goodwind, while seeking the New Mexico state championship.

The film stars new and rising actor Kauchani Bratt who plays Navajo basketball standout Jimmy Holiday. Bratt is Quechua People of Peru on his mother's side, born for Coahuiltecan on his father's side.



*Rez Ball* also stars Indigenous actors Amber Midthunder, Jessica Matten, Dallas Goldtooth, Cody Lightning and Ernie Tsosie.

Kauchani Bratt was chosen for his role in part because of his basketball experience playing from middle school through high school when his team won the Native American Basketball Invitational.

Director Freeland's emotional story was inspired by author and New York Times sports reporter Michael Powell's nonfiction 2019 book *Canyon Dreams: A Basketball Season on the Navajo Nation* about the real life Chinle Wildcats as the team's sought a 2016-2017 state title.

Freeland, who is Navajo and grew up in Gallup, N.M., was a writer on the critically acclaimed, 2021 movie *Reservation Dogs* with Seminole writer-director Sterlin Harjo.

She is known for her honest portrayal of reservation life in her 2014 debut film *Drunktown's Finest*. The movie premiered at the 2014 Sundance Film Festival.

Freeland has been a director for 15 years. She said *Drunktown's Finest* was influenced by her experience growing up on the Navajo Nation.

Freeland is a 1999 graduate of Navajo Prep in Farmington and 2004 graduate of Arizona State



**Navajo writer-director Sydney Freeland directs *Rez Ball* star Kauchani Bratt who plays Navajo basketball standout Jimmy Holiday.**

University, where she obtained her BFA in Computer Animation. She was named a 2004 Fulbright scholar and focused her research on Indigenous peoples in Ecuador. In 2007, she earned her MFA in Motion Pictures and Television from the Academy of Art University in San Francisco.

*Rez Ball* will be released globally on Netflix on September 27.

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