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Visionary Diné College President Charles ‘Monty’ Roessel passes after long battle with cancer, leaves education legacy

‘We’ll see his vision become real.’ – Navajo Nation President Buu Nygren

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. – Diné College President Charles “Monty” Roessel died peacefully in Albuquerque on Monday morning surrounded by his family.

His brother, Bob Roessel, said he succumbed to his long battle with cancer and had been in hospice care. He was 63.

“It’s with great sadness that I learned this morning of the loss of Diné College President Dr. Charles Roessel,” said Navajo Nation President Buu Nygren who met numerous times with Dr. Roessel and attend Diné College graduation at his invitation.

“Despite his illness,” the President said, “Dr. Roessel continued to valiantly lead Diné College where he was the beloved president since 2017, and followed in the footsteps of his father, Dr. Robert Roessel, the college’s first president from 1968 to 1969.”

Dr. Roessel grew up in Round Rock on the Navajo Nation. He graduated from Chinle High School where his father served as superintendent.

In February 2012, he served as acting director of the U. S. Bureau of Indian Education, the top federal agency dealing with the education of Native children where he oversaw 66 BIE schools on the Navajo Nation. In December 2013, he was appointed BIE director.



The late Diné College President Charles “Monty” Roessel who died Monday at age 63.

Dr. Roessel received his bachelor's degree in photography and industrial arts at the University of Northern Colorado in 1984. He received his master's degree in journalism from Prescott College in Prescott, Ariz., and a doctorate in Educational Administration and Supervision from Arizona State University.

After college graduation, he worked as a photojournalist in Greeley but left to become managing editor of the weekly Navajo Times, which transitioned to daily Navajo Times TODAY.

The paper was published five days a week until February 19, 1987, when it was closed for several months before reopening as a weekly.



Navajo Nation President Buu Nygren met with Diné College President Monty Roessel and Navajo Technical University President Elmer Guy numerous times in 2024.

and songs of Spider Woman and Changing Woman that go with it.

The story relays how Jaclyn and her grandmother shear sheep, gather plants to dye wool, and weave a rug.

His 1993 book, *Kinaaldá: A Navajo Girl Grows Up*, again displayed his writing and photography of a young 13-year-old named Celinda McKelvey who was preparing for her coming-of-age ceremony for Navajo girls. He published the book while he was executive director of the Rough Rock Community School.

His last book was in 2002 with the late Arizona State University Professor Emeritus Peter Iverson, who wrote prolifically about Native American history, especially Navajos. It was titled *Diné: A History of the Navajos*. Dr. Roessel provided stunning photographs.

During his tenure at Diné College, Dr. Roessel led its transition from a two-year to a four-year institution. Since its founding, it has served its predominantly Navajo student population from its campus in Tsaile, Ariz.

Under his leadership, the college established four transdisciplinary schools. These include the School of Diné Studies and Education, the School of Science, Technology, Engineering and Math, the School of Arts, Humanities and English, and the School of Business and Social Science.

Significantly, he guided the college to begin the Navajo Sovereignty Institute, the Navajo Cultural Arts Program, and began the work to create of the Navajo Nation's first law school.

In May 2024, he announced a collaboration between Diné College and Arizona State University to offer a Bachelor of Arts in Navajo Law.

The program is to be led by Diné College Dean of the School of Business and Social Science Patrick Blackwater with the support and advocacy of Stacy Leeds, dean of the ASU Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law.

In 1990, Dr. Roessel became vice president, co-owner and editor of Navajo Nation Today with former Navajo Times TODAY editor and publisher Mark Trahant.

Before he began his education career, Dr. Roessel was a photographer.

His photography was published in *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Arizona Highways*, *National Geographic*, *Sports Illustrated*, *New Mexico Magazine* and *Native Peoples*.

In 2004, his photography appeared in the Arizona State Museum exhibition, "Viewpoints: Native Americans and Photography."

He published his first book in 1995 titled *Songs from the Loom: A Navajo Girl Learns to Weave*. It featured his daughter, Jaclyn Roessel, who asked her grandmother to teach her how to weave.

In the book, her grandmother explained that she wants Jaclyn to learn weaving as well as the stories

“Dr. Roessel brought this visionary idea to me last May with the concept to train our own young lawyers, steeped in Navajo culture and tradition,” President Nygren said. “It appealed to me immediately. We discussed opening a branch here in Window Rock, close to the seat of government where laws are debated and created. We will see that his vision becomes real.”

In 2020, Dr. Roessel was elected to the distinguished 244-year-old American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He was recognized in the fields of Leadership, Policy and Communications.

His class included Indigenous writers, leaders and educators Joy Harjo, Suzan Harjo, Kevin Gover, Greg Sarris, Kay WalkingStick, Edgar Heap of birds and Aileen Moreton-Robinson.

Academy members are leaders in the arts and sciences, business, philanthropy and public affairs.



Dr. Charles "Monty" Roessel

The American Academy was founded in 1780 during the American Revolution by John Adams, John Hancock and 60 other scholar-patriots.

It was established to honor excellence in every field of human endeavor and to cultivate every art and science that advances the interest, honor, dignity and happiness of a free, independent, and virtuous people.

From September 1997 to December 2000, Dr. Roessel was director of the Navajo Nation Round Rock Chapter of AmeriCorps.

He worked at Rough Rock Community School from 1998 until 2011, beginning as director of community services and named executive director in 2000. In 2007, he became superintendent of Rough Rock Community School.

He is survived by his brothers and sisters Robert, Raymond, Faith and Mary, his children Jaclyn, Bryan, Bobbie and Robin, several grandchildren and many nieces and nephews.

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