Kendra Aguilar

MPA - Tribal Governance, 2012

Co-Founder, One Totem

**Kendra Aguilar** is part of the first ever cohort of U.S. Tribal students to pursue their Doctorate in Indigenous Development and Advancement (IDA) through Te Whare Wananga O Awanuiarangi, an Indigenous-Maori University based in New Zealand. The cohort is led by Alan Parker, Evergreen’s Co-founding faculty of the Tribal MPA program. While studying she has continued to work as an Independent Consultant on community building projects involving local nonprofits, Tribes, and City & County agencies. She is also the Co-Founder of a Native organization, One Totem, and donates her talents as the Assistant Director of Seattle Women In Jazz.

**Interview format; questions are as follows**:

* Why did you choose the Evergreen MPA program and how did you determine which concentration would be the best fit to your career goals?

As a student of Evergreen’s Reservation Based Community Determined Program (RBCDP) I was encouraged and inspired to actively take part in making a difference in my community. After building the foundation for a Native nonprofit with a fellow RBCDP student, we knew we would benefit from the top-rated MPA program Evergreen had to offer. Although some would have thought it more prudent to choose the Nonprofit concentration, the opportunity to learn from and along-side faculty and students with similar cultural values and a foundation of understanding of the complex history and current issues impacting Tribes and other Indigenous peoples made it the natural choice. It is the first MPA program to work directly with local Tribes to develop a curriculum suited for building a career in Tribal Governance or in serving Native communities. I had witnessed what other graduates of the Tribal cohort had done to benefit their peoples and was compelled to honor the sacrifices of my own ancestors by becoming a part of that legacy.

* Were/ Are you impressed with the convenience, cost and value of the program?

There were no other MPA programs in the country with a Tribal Governance focus. The convenient weekend schedule made it possible for me and many other out-of-town students to travel for classes without having to leave our homes, jobs, families and cultural communities.

* What was/ is your greatest take- away from the Evergreen MPA program and how have you applied that knowledge to your current professional position?

I’ve taken with me several great things from this program. It gave me the tools I need to succeed in any public service related field as well as a lifelong network of friends and colleagues who will continue to work together towards building a brighter future for our peoples.

However, the greatest contribution this program has made to me in my career serving Native communities is the knowledge that together we can apply standard as well as our own traditional values and ways of knowing & learning to create a clear and proven pathway for Native student success.

* How has/ does the unique platform of the MPA cohort, faculty interaction and seminar structure benefited you in meeting your career and life goals?

I feel very passionately about the importance of having the opportunity to be part of a cohort of faculty and peers with a shared cultural perspective within an environment that mirrors many of our own traditional ways of learning. This allowed us to create a safe space for the sacred work we consider education to be, without having to explain ourselves or face the same hurtful ignorance we often do in all other aspects of our lives. Being Native means we are already full-time teachers, whether it is for our children or those who do not understand us. In other institutions I attended in the past, I felt I was paying tuition in order to teach those around me. Although I acknowledge that such an environment can have some benefits for all parties, having the Tribal cohort allowed us the ***rare*** opportunity to draw the focus away from having to teach others and instead focus on sharing our knowledge with each other. This Tribal cohort structure, which allowed for the strengthening of knowledge and relationships among Indigenous peoples, prepared me for the experience of learning across unique yet similar cultures with the Maori of New Zealand in my doctoral program.

* What advice would/can you offer to prospective and current students?

The journey may be yours alone and at times you may face challenges, grow weary and doubt your ability, but remember; the spirits of those who came before you and those you have yet to touch are always with you. The success of one is the success of all and we are cheering you on.