



*“She’s going to cure cancer one day,”* my coach said.

It was the end of the year banquet for my Varsity cheer team senior year. I was honored to hear that she thought of me so highly because I respected her greatly. It was a bittersweet moment, reminiscing on the memories we had made that year in preparation to say goodbye to high school and hello to the future.

My name is Maribel Garcia-Kedely, I’m a Sophomore at Arizona State University studying biological sciences. When I was younger, I knew that I wanted to do something that could utilize the effort that I had dedicated for so long to my academic career, but more importantly I wanted to make sure that I was doing something meaningful. There were a few things in my life that took a while for me to overcome. I was conflicted between academics and extra-curriculars. I chose to miss out on a lot of memories for the sake of school, like prom and senior events but I wouldn’t have had it any other way. Everything I have done has led me to where I am now.

Another conflict that has weighed on me heavily is the paradox between tradition and progression. Over the years I have become deeply connected with my roots as a Navajo woman and I strive to be able to pass down all the facets of my heritage to my own future children. Hózhó Náhasdlíí’ is the center of the Navajo culture. All of our traditions emphasize balance and harmony between people, nature, and animals. We are taught the beauty way. Anything you do in life should be done in unity with the world around you. Hózhó Náhasdlíí’ translates to Walk in Beauty. The Navajo reservation is founded on these very customs and beliefs.

However, the financial setbacks that my people have encountered since signing the treaty of 1868 to return to their homelands have made it difficult to provide the same opportunities to young people that remain on the reservation as compared to those who chose to leave.

So, many kids are faced with a decision to reside on the reservation and preserve their family’s legacy or to leave and utilize the resources available to them elsewhere. I have struggled with this as well. Being in school and living in a house with running water and insurance while my

grandparents struggle on the reservation to feed their horses and maintain the land by themselves has weighed on me heavily. I feel almost as if I have betrayed our culture.

When I came to ASU though I found that I need to pursue school not in spite of who I am but because of who I am. I was selected to be an intern with the Arizona Cancer Evolution Center and work alongside true researchers like Dr. Carlo Maley and Valerie Harris as well as students like myself who are also trying to learn while preserving the importance of culture. This has opened my eyes to the vast array of opportunities that I have.

In our project, we are researching many species of animals in many different families, looking at biological mechanisms and human implications on their environments that might affect their incidence rates of cancer. Our ultimate goal is to compare these to the incidence and mechanisms of cancer in humans. Our meetings have changed the way I think and brainstorm. No idea is turned away and no thought goes undiscussed. Not only has this program enhanced my scope of biology and ecology but I have seen firsthand how research takes place and how an idea can be carefully sculpted into a poster which conveys these findings in the most strategic way. I've had the opportunity to expand my knowledge and interest in coding through tutorials and one on one troubleshooting with Valerie. Each person invested in this program and the Arizona Cancer Evolution center has made it their mission to teach and discover. Being a part of it has been a privilege and I am eager for the future.

I have learned that cancer is a sporadic and masterful disease. Its basis is mutation which also happens to be the foundation of evolution and life itself. Without mutation there is no life but unfortunately with mutation there will always be cancer. Thus, I don't think that I'll ever have the opportunity to completely "cure," cancer like my high school coach said. This program though has shown me that with dedication and passion, a worthwhile and effective treatment is on the horizon.