The heart of an explorer maps a new college course

A S A KID, REGGIE WHITTEN LOVED SCIENCE, DINOSAURS AND EXPLORING. Those early interests led to a career at Oklahoma State University in Stillwater, where Whitten, with his wife, Rachelle, and his brother-in-law, Robert Newman, established the Whitten-Newman Foundation to provide educational experiences for youth and to help stop drug and alcohol abuse.

During the foundation’s ExplorOlogy program at the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History, Whitten met OSU College of Osteopathic Medicine anatomy professor Kent Smith, a native Comanche with a long-time interest in paleontology.

Whitten believed a Native American like Smith, an expert in animals and fossils, would inspire other young Native Americans to discover and learn. Together, Whitten and Smith created Native Explorers, a summer program for Native American college students. It is primarily a scientific expedition and includes collecting and learning about vertebrates of the Cenozoic and Mesozoic eras.

The program’s goal is to increase the number of Native American in science and medicine. Expenses are covered for students selected for the program, and they are introduced to graduate and medical programs at OSU and the University of Oklahoma.

During the first expedition to southern Utah in 2010, students prospected and collected fossils of early mammals of the Paleocene age. Geologist Dale Harbor of the U.S. Department of Agriculture explained how the Forest Service manages natural resources and preserves historic sites.

This summer, the Native Explorers traveled to the Oklahoma panhandle to prospect and collect vertebrate fossils from the Miocene age deposits in Beaver County and Jurassic age deposits in Cimarron County. Before setting out, students attended off-campus orientation for fieldwork and learned about OSU Center for Health Sciences programs, including an overview of osteopathic medicine presented by department chair Robin Dyer, D.O.

The Native Explorers studied the living flora and fauna of the eco-regions, as well as disciplines within the natural sciences including geology and conservation biology (wildlife management, range management and forestry and archaeology). They also learned more about Native American cultures and traditions.

Joe Thomas, an OSU geography graduate student from McAllister, Okla., learned about Native Explorers through his Chickasaw nation affiliation. “I knew absolutely nothing about prospecting for fossils and, in fact, had not even been camping,” he says. But the project and activities sounded interesting, so he signed up.

Advised to “look for something that shouldn’t be there,” Thomas found an ancient molar from a horse identified as preceding the Spanish occupation of the area (1200-1300 A.D.).

“Had I not known what we were looking for, I think I would have given up, or I could rise up and do something,” Whitten says.

During a 2010 trip to the Washakie Plateau in south-central Utah, OSU Center for Health Sciences Professor Anne Weil, led students to identify and collect fossil specimens on the nearby rocky outcrops in a museum. “I thought, ‘Wow!’”

Next summer Thomas wants to join the program as a mentor. “It was great to get to know different tribal affiliations and to see things you would normally see only in a museum,” he says. “We got to see them in their natural state.”

Partnerships with the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service, the U.S. Department of Interior’s Bureau of Land Management, the Chickasaw Nation and the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History provide experts and a professional network to advise students about specific career paths.

Athena Padgett, a Muscogee (Creek) majoring in human nutrition and pre-medicine at OSU, attended both Native Explorers digs. She says the program sharpened her investigative skills.

“You have to know what to look for, and you have to learn how to dig. It takes a lot of patience and a lot of time. The program also taught her more about herself and her heritage.

“Middle school kids really need to have someone to relate to, both as a teacher and a Native American. Whitten’s interest in science and exploring has never dimmed. He says it’s rewarding to observe explorers grow and add to their knowledge. “They go out on site. They sleep outdoors in tents, and they learn about the old ways.”

Charles Baker, right, an educator for the Whitten-Newman ExplorOlogy program, helps OSU student Athena Padgett collect fossils from the Ogallala Formation in Beaver County, Okla.

After the dig, Padgett worked in Smith’s research laboratory at the OSU Center for Health Sciences and at the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History to identify what could be a tooth from a Colombian mammoth. A resident from near Kenton, Okla., found the tooth years ago and recently brought it to Smith for identification.

In June, the Whitten-Newman Foundation-OSU Foundation Paleontology and Anatomy Fund for Native Americans donated $50,000 to the program’s epicenter rather than its border.

“Something like this is so small would make you so happy, but it gave me a real boost of confidence,” she says. “I thought, ‘Wow!’”

“Native Explorers is all about, having someone to relate to, both as a teacher and a Native American. Whitten’s interest in science and exploring has never dimmed. He says it’s rewarding to observe explorers grow and add to their knowledge. “They go out on site. They sleep outdoors in tents, and they learn about the old ways.”

Seeing the delight and excitement of a young explorer unearth a fossil in an ancient bone or tooth is priceless, he says. “There’s just no substitute for that big grin.”

MARIKA SCHAEFER