Tribes

Five scenic motorcycle adventures wind through the state's most beautiful places.

"I love this land and the buffalo and will not part with it."—SATANTA, KIOWA CHIEF

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TODAY
Guided by Science

The Native Explorers Foundation not only hooks Native American youth into science, it provides an outlet for tribal mentorship.

By Nathan Gunter

KENT SMITH KNEELS on a dusty Cimarron County hillside, peering at a fragment of bone through a magnifying glass that dangles from his neck. Nearby, students and Smith’s fellow paleontologists dig carefully around an outcropping of rock jutting from the ground, building a pile of fossils they have coaxed from the soil, some as small as a fingernail.

One by one, Smith lets the students look through the magnifying glass, patiently explaining to them what they are seeing—how they can be sure this object is a bone, not simply another rock. Smith shows the students how to label the fragment so it can be sent to a lab at the University of Oklahoma and studied further.

Smith has become a mentor, but as a college student, he struggled to find his own. A member of the Comanche Nation, an associate professor of anatomy at the OSU Center for Health Sciences in Tulsa, and an affiliated research associate at the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History in Norman, Smith works with the Native Explorers Foundation to guide Native American students as they pursue careers in science.

“When I graduated with a PhD in zoology, I was one of about a hundred Native Americans in the country to get a graduate degree in a science field that year,” Smith says. “We’re trying to get more Native Americans interested in science.”

Native Explorers helps Native American college students explore careers in the sciences through hands-on activities and year-round networking opportunities. Every summer since 2010, Native Explorers has taken students into the field to participate in digs at paleontology hot spots, including Black Mesa in the Oklahoma Panhandle.

“We use paleontology as a draw for the kids to come with us on an expedition, and we teach them about biology, pathology, ecology, and anatomy,” Smith says. “Paleontology draws from all of that.”

Mona Easterling, a member of the Choctaw Nation and a 2012 graduate of Northeastern State University, says the program affirmed her career choice. This fall, she will begin a master’s program in natural sciences at NSU. She plans to become a college instructor and a mentor for Native American students.

“I wasn’t able to network with people of my own tribe, so Native Explorers was very inspiring,” she says. “I was glad to meet Dr. Smith, who is Native American and has a passion for science.”
It was Smith’s passion for mentorship that inspired Oklahoma City attorney Reggie Whitten to help him create the foundation in 2010.

“Kent is one of my heroes,” says Whitten, who heads the Whitten-Newman Foundation—of which Native Explorers is a part—along with his wife, Rachelle Whitten, and his father-in-law, John Newman. “He’s been the guiding light of the Native Explorers foundation.”

Since its founding in 2010, the foundation has purchased seven hundred acres near Black Mesa to be what Whitten calls a “living classroom.” There, students can study paleontology and the area’s Native American archaeological sites.

“You can learn about geology, biology, zoology, paleontology, and archaeology there,” says Whitten. “We’re teaching these students that it’s cool to be smart.”

The expeditions have paid scholarly dividends: At Black Mesa and in Utah, students found fossilized teeth of *Phytosaurs*, crocodile-like predators that lived more than 200 million years ago. The 2010 expedition produced a research paper published in the peer-reviewed journal *The Western North American Naturalist*. Of the paper’s six authors, three were Native Explorers students.

“These students are now published,” says Native Explorers executive director Jeff Hargrave, who is a citizen of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation. “This is going to help them if they choose to pursue a doctoral program.”

Whatever may be waiting to be discovered—whether in the sprawling sandstone of Black Mesa or the intricacies of human DNA—Native Explorers is helping to create opportunities for Native Americans to contribute to humanity’s knowledge of the world around it.

Get There: Information about the Native Explorers Foundation is available at nativeexplorers.org. Learn more about the Whitten-Newman Foundation at whitten-newmanfoundation.org.