

Book Learning and Life Lessons: Chris Sindone of Haskell Indian Nations University

By Barbara Ellen Sorensen



As president of the AIHEC Student Congress and Haskell's student senate, Sindone spoke on the importance of tribal higher education at the Rayburn House Office Building in Washington, DC.

At 28, Chris Sindone (Pawnee of Oklahoma) has already learned some difficult life lessons. A senior in business at Haskell Indian Nations University in Lawrence, Kansas, Sindone is learning to be what he calls “a creative problem solver.” Problem-solving is a skill Sindone learned the hard way, and one he wishes to nurture in young tribal members. An avid reader, Sindone is a top student and is in his second term as president of the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC) Student Congress. He is also serving his second term as president of Haskell's student senate. In January 2016, Sindone received

an Outstanding Leadership Award from the State of Kansas House of Representatives, and he has been a member of more than a dozen campus clubs and committees.

A successful young man, to be sure. But his road to success was not without its share of obstacles. Born in New York, Sindone's parents divorced when he was young and financial instability forced him and his mother to move frequently. By the time he graduated, he had attended four different high schools. “My mom and I moved back to Oklahoma and I became the man of the house. I made my own decisions. I was literally growing up in two

worlds," he says. "My father was Italian and my mom was Otoe, Iowa, Kiowa, Pawnee, Cheyenne, and Lakota. I self-identify as a Native person and am an enrolled member of the Pawnee of Oklahoma."

As a young man, Sindone made poor choices that affected his life forever. Under the influence of alcohol, he broke into someone's house. He was charged with breaking and entering, and although it was not considered a felony, he served a total of 11 months behind bars. Sindone turned 21 in prison.

Released in 2009, Sindone worked hard to turn his life around. He landed a supervisory position at the Indoor Air Care Company in Ponomo, New York. But Sindone realized that he could do much more if he had a college degree. He applied to 10 schools, and Haskell was the only one that admitted him. "Haskell offered me a real opportunity. My tribe was right on board with supporting me with the financial aid that I badly needed. Even more important, the financial aid they gave me framed me as an adult without parental support," he explains. "I can never thank my tribe enough. The best way I know how to give back to my community is through completion of my education."

Sindone credits his father and stepfather with having positively influenced him: "It was my stepfather who told me, 'All of us continue to learn throughout our lives. We never stop learning. And, we learn through each other and this is made better by having open communication. We learn through communicating with one another.'" Sindone's stepfather is currently the chairman of the Comanche Nation of Oklahoma. "My fathers were always there for me through involvement in sports, and especially when I got myself into trouble," he says. "They continually told me things that helped me transition into becoming a man."

Sindone has also had his share of sorrows. "Lately, I have been upset about my only older brother's recent passing," he explains. "He passed away the day before my birthday this year. We shared our dreams together and attended Haskell together for some time. My brother was the reason I pushed myself to become better. He and my mother are my biggest supporters, and they always praised me everywhere they went. They are the only reason I chose to go back to school, and they helped me every step of the way. I now have three younger half-brothers, two step-brothers, and one step-sister."

When asked what he plans to do after graduation, he quickly responds. "I know that I want to attend grad school, and I know that I need an internship," he says, and he has set his sights on the University of Kansas in Lawrence and its business law program. Sindone realizes that stating his desire to become a lawyer carries a lot of baggage. However, this is where his "creative problem-solving" comes into play. His perspective comes from a place of earned knowledge: "There are a lot of things in Indian communities that we can do much better. We can do a better job of housing our people, of developing a stronger infrastructure, and of educating our children. We have tribal resources that must be managed well so that we can become more self-sustaining. By focusing on federal tribal law and economic development, I can help tribes be

creative with solving problems. First and foremost, for any person wanting to work with tribes at a business level is to ask: 'How does Indian Country fit into the business world?' This is where communication is key."

Sindone's unflinching optimism is complemented by solid knowledge of his Native American heritage. To become comfortable with his identity, Sindone went through a lot of soul-searching. "I had to ask myself some hard questions," he shares. "I had to clarify, 'Who am I?' and 'What do I stand for?'" These are questions that Sindone believes all young people should ask themselves. "If you don't stand for anything, you'll fall for anything," he says, adding, "As students we have a strong voice. I am a great proponent of leadership. Becoming a student senate president

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definitely honed my leadership skills, but I believe school in and of itself is a good place to start a strong leadership path."

Sindone is clear-headed about his past. "I was in jail for drinking, breaking and entering. I always live with that." It is his past, however, that makes his words of wisdom ring true: "The decisions you make can lead you down a narrow and bad path. Choices that you make when you are young can affect you for the rest of your life. At the same time, don't let the past and your mistakes pull you down forever." In Sindone's case, time and patience helped him heal. "My self-identity brought me to other young people and I saw that many of them were not in a good place," he says. "I try to use my platform now to tell young people that the best way to learn is through others. I also tell them, 'Plan for something, carefully, and think about how to achieve it the best way. Always think about your future.'" ▲

Barbara Ellen Sorensen served as senior editor for Winds of Change magazine and writes on American Indian education.