

These NAMES Won't Be Forgotten

By JAN TYLER

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Lynda Nuttall has a poetic way of describing NAMES, the Native American Multi-Cultural Education School, where Denver students who dropped out of high school become stars.

"It's a place where chaos dictates order, where laughter is the rule not the exception," says Nuttall, who has worked as school director for 10 years. "It's a place where it's OK to cry because life's not fair. And it's a place where testing is special." Students are tested to show improvement, she explains. "We look forward to that," she says.

Nuttall rescued the school from extinction last year after the Denver Indian Center, which ran the program for 20 years, was passed over for a Title 9 grant from the Department of Education. The school's 58 students faced an uncertain future.

"I cried — we all cried," says Evelyn Gutierrez, a 35-year-old mother of five. Halfway through her struggle to get her GED, the funds were suddenly gone. "I felt like letting go of my dream. Lynda helped out," she says.

Evelyn and her older sister, Louise, easily could have slipped into their statistical place: More than half of the Native Americans who enroll in public schools in Colorado never graduate. Nationwide, one-third of adult Native Americans are counted as illiterate.

"I just couldn't let it happen," says Nuttall.

So she got busy. Within a month, she had raised \$1,980 and reopened the non-profit school in the converted storage area of a Denver church with donated books, furniture and two computers. Although she continues to struggle with fundraising, last May she graduated her first class of 15 students, each of whom received a handmade beaded Indian tassel.

Evelyn and Louise were among those in the first graduating class. Louise received a John Elway Scholarship to attend college plus additional money for supplies through friends of NAMES.

In each of these victories, Nuttall relives a part of her own struggle to adapt to life outside the reservation. Nuttall, a Cheyenne River Sioux/Cree, dropped out of high school in Billings, Mont. She had moved off the reservation with her mother at age 16 and met a world in which she didn't fit the norm.

Understanding that sense of isolation, Nuttall aims to create an educational environment that affirms each student. Although the school filled a desperately needed niche — it's the only adult education school designed to meet the needs of urban Native Americans in transition from reservations — the doors are open to other students as well.

"At our school, we accept them for who they are and the skills they bring — what they have to share with us," says Nuttall. "We teach them that they are special, precious people in the universe, and that they don't have to worry what others are thinking of them. We are not full of stereotypes of who or what we should be.

"Education," she adds, "is what we have to do to make a difference for the next generation, for all cultures.... We are teaching them to walk in a world of many cultures."

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