

EINSTEIN CELEBRATES NATIVE AMERICAN HERITAGE MONTH

In marking Native American Heritage Month, the office of diversity and inclusion asked Breckin Horton, an M.D. student in the class of 2024, and Keely Redhage, a program coordinator in microbiology and immunology, to share their perspectives as individuals of Native American descent in the medical education and research community.



BRECKIN HORTON
M.D. student, Class of 2024

Rural Roots

In November, we honor the ancestry and traditions of indigenous people to mark Native American Heritage Month. Breckin Horton is a first-year medical student at Albert Einstein College of Medicine who is Native American on her father's side—"my great-great-grandparents were fully Choctaw, so that makes me one-eighth," she said. We sat down with Breckin via Zoom to trace her path from the eastern Oklahoma town of Spiro, where she grew up with her two brothers, to the Bronx.

The area around Spiro is rural—“our neighbors had cattle and chickens,” said Breckin. She estimated that about one third of the students in her town’s high school were of Native ancestry, mostly Choctaw and some Cherokee. Of the 100 people in her class, 55 graduated. “Just a third of those ended up pursuing higher education, and only two of us left the state,” said Breckin.

She attended Lipscomb University, a small private liberal arts college in Nashville, TN, where she majored in biochemistry and brought an interest in medicine that was born in high school. “I had a shadowing experience at a clinic that served those with low-incomes and inadequate insurance, and I had a brilliant high school science teacher who taught AP chemistry my senior year,” she said.

Breckin loved Lipscomb. “It exposed me to a lot of different views,” she said. Her classmates learned about her views as well. “I have a Choctaw license plate on my car instead of the Oklahoma state plate, and people would ask, ‘What is that?’ I’d say, ‘I live in the tribal nation of Oklahoma.’

“They’d say, ‘Oh, do you live on a reservation, and do you go to regular school?’ I realized that the concept of a Native American is very different for different groups of people. Our tribal community was integrated into the wider community. The tribe offered supplemental education at the local schools and hosted Christmas parties with a Santa at the Choctaw community center. It’s not a reservation the way many people think of a reservation.”

A recent court decision gave the tribes more power to govern themselves but has brought other areas such as state laws and taxes into question. Breckin explained, “I think it certainly highlights the complexity of the system of nations within the nation.”

Finding Einstein

Breckin thought she’d be going to medical school in her home state but really enjoyed her time at Einstein when she came for an interview. She noted, “I saw

myself as someone who wanted to advocate in medicine, who wanted to serve people who really need to be served, and I felt I would best learn how to do that at Einstein.”

When asked what advice she has for Native American students who are considering or actively pursuing a career in medicine, Breckin said, “A big barrier is the overwhelming cost of a medical education. You need to know that there is an abundance of resources.”

In high school, a Choctaw Nation administrator from the Youth Education Service gave students sheets detailing full scholarships they could apply for. Her tribe has supported her every semester with money towards schooling, and they also pay technology fees and a clothing allowance. “It’s also helpful to find somebody else who’s done it and ask them how they did it,” she advised.

Patient Care Considerations

When asked how physicians could better serve Native American patients, Breckin replied, “Be very slow to stereotype patients. Native Americans are incredibly variable and multifaceted; there’s not one Native American experience, there are hundreds. In our Health Systems Health Equity class, the professor brought in a nursing education book that said Jewish patients will likely say this and African Americans may say that—he was pointing it out as something that was not okay. And the book said Native Americans may be more spiritual. I thought, ‘I know so many Native Americans who aren’t spiritual at all!’ The best thing that education systems can do is remember that we’re all humans with individual experiences.”



KEELY REDHAGE
Project Coordinator, Microbiology and Immunology

Keely Redhage, project coordinator in the laboratory of William Jacobs, Jr., Ph.D., is another member of the Einstein community with a Native American history—she is of Cherokee descent. She earned a bachelor’s of science degree in microbiology and molecular genetics at Oklahoma State University and came to Einstein after completing her master’s degree in molecular pharmacology at the Mayo Clinic. Keely offers this perspective on patient care: “My mom is a nurse practitioner and a primary diabetes care provider for the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. From her I learned that trust, patience, and respect are key aspects of providing healthcare to Native people.” There have been many times, she

said, where the government misused data or misrepresented the tribal community to such an extent that it resulted in harm to the community and an erosion of trust. "I think to address inequities and better support Native Americans, the programs need the communities' input. Native Americans *must* have a seat at the table," she said.

Those who serve the Native American community are meeting a definite medical need. American Indian and Alaskan Natives (AI/ANs) have a life expectancy 5.5 years shorter than the United States average. They suffer disproportionately higher rates of kidney, liver, and stomach cancers. Causes include poverty, inadequate education, and discrimination within health institutions.

And while AI/ANs make up 1 percent of the U.S. population, only .2 percent of individuals accepted to attend medical school identified as AI/AN in the 2019-2020 application cycle. This underrepresentation in the medical community contributes to the cultural barriers that AI/AN patients often encounter. It also reduces the quality of their care. "Non-native physicians can have bias against Native Americans even if they do not realize it, which can affect the care they give," said Keely. "Because Native physicians understand the pain and trauma their ancestors encountered, that helps them provide appropriate care to their communities. We have many ceremonies that are sacred and are medicine for us, so it is imperative that practitioners understand this and the importance of incorporating our culture into our care."

Native Americans in Research

Also in short supply are Native researchers—only .4% of Ph.D. degrees were awarded to AI/ANs in 2016 (and that is in all subject areas). "Because of our cultural and personal experiences, Natives bring a unique perspective to many advanced fields such as medicine and science," said Keely. "Understanding genetics with respect to Native populations is important to providing better care and treatment. Native investigators should lead studies and have input from tribal leaders to ensure cultural respect is always shown."

Einstein has begun a dialog with the [American Indian Community House](#), a nonprofit that serves the health, social service, and cultural needs of Native Americans residing in New York City, in the hope of enhancing opportunities for Native American students at Einstein and for broadening understanding of the unique cultural perspectives of the AI/AN community.

To Learn More

A number of major organizations provide educational resources as part of Native American Heritage Month; among them are the [Library of Congress](#), the [National Archives and Records Administration](#), the [National Endowment for the Humanities](#), the [National Gallery of Art](#), the [National Park Service](#), the [Smithsonian Institution](#), and the United States [Holocaust Memorial Museum](#). To expand your knowledge of our country's Native American heritage, you can take advantage of the variety of virtual cultural activities they offer—[webinars](#), [webcasts](#), [films](#), and more.

NATIVE AMERICAN HERITAGE MONTH

In November, we seek to better understand and honor the diverse cultures and histories of Native Americans. It is also a time to acknowledge the unique challenges and injustices that these indigenous peoples have faced historically and still encounter today.



In the Bronx, **2.9%** of individuals identify as Native American.

New York City is located on **Lenape** and **Wappinger** homelands. These peoples were displaced to the Midwest during colonization.

Ask yourself:

- ◆ Who has rights to this territory?
- ◆ What indigenous peoples have lived here?
(See the land map to get a true sense)
- ◆ What can I learn about the indigenous peoples currently living in this community?
- ◆ What are land acknowledgements and why do they matter?
- ◆ How can I be an ally for equity?

Interested in Learning More?

The American Indian Community House (AICH) is a not-for-profit organization serving the needs of Native Americans residing in New York City. Their mission is to improve and promote the well-being of the American Indian community and to increase the visibility of American Indian cultures in an urban setting in order to cultivate awareness, understanding, and respect.



Learn more at aich.org.
Or follow AICH on Instagram! [@aichnyc](https://www.instagram.com/aichnyc)



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