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## Navajo women making a mark

BY RANDALL HYMAN

HOW THEIR VOICES  
ARE BEING HEARD ON  
ISSUES FROM ENERGY  
TO EDUCATION.



## THEY ARE MAKING A MARK ON AND OFF AMERICA'S LARGEST RESERVATION – ON ISSUES FROM ENERGY TO EDUCATION.

### NAVAJO NATION

**O**ne who has a master's degree in linguistics has made green energy a crusade on a reservation where coal, gas, and uranium have reigned supreme for decades, leaving tainted groundwater in their wake.

Another returned to the Navajo reservation from Chicago to find that fracking had marred large sections of her native land – something she now works to stop in one of the largest methane hot spots in the United States.

A third was so distraught by the lack of ballot access on the reservation that she organized getting voters to the polls on horseback – her version of saddle-up democracy.

Two others have immersed themselves in politics directly – one as the youngest member of the Arizona State Legislature and the other as one of three women on the 24-member Navajo Nation Council.

All are part of a rising tide of activist women on the nation's largest reservation who are making a mark on everything from energy policy to the democratic process. Their voices echo in state capitols and corporate boardrooms across the American Southwest, trying to change business as usual within and outside the reservation.

Their efforts come at a particularly fraught time. Last year, from the vermilion sands bordering the Grand Canyon to the oil-rich scrublands east of Chaco Canyon, the Navajo Nation was hit by a perfect storm – a convergence of soaring pandemic deaths, dwindling energy revenues, and rising unemployment. Amid the chaos, Native women stepped up in what some see as an unprecedented wave. While one COVID-19 relief group raised \$18 million in a matter of months, other women redoubled efforts to dismantle policies that have left Navajo (Diné) people vulnerable.

“I think that you're actually seeing a return to the way that Diné society has always been,” says Nicole Horseherder, executive director of Tó Nizhóní Ání (Sacred Water Speaks), an organization pushing for new energy policies and water protection across the Navajo Nation. “Women are coming forward and saying, ‘I am a leader too. I can make these decisions. I can make better decisions.’”

Some of the women, while taking controversial stands, have been motivated by deprivations they've seen on the reservation. Others are concerned about the damage being done to tribal lands from developers' spades and drills. But underneath all the narratives is another factor – the dominant presence of women in Navajo society, where taking charge is rooted in a matrilineal culture.

“When you see the destruction in your community, you realize you have to do something,” says Wendy Greyeyes, assistant professor of Native American studies at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. “So, women are empowered. A lot of that harks back to our own creation stories. Changing Woman was a very powerful deity who reflected thinking about the longevity of our existence, of the Diné people. This ideology is baked into our DNA as Navajo women – our need to care and nurture and protect our communities, our families.”

Five female leaders recently met with the Monitor to talk about their journeys and visions for new beginnings within the Navajo reservation, a land larger than West Virginia that extends across three Southwestern states and is home to 170,000 tribal members. ■

# Five Navajo women on the rise

STORY AND PHOTOS

BY RANDALL HYMAN / CORRESPONDENT



Fajada Butte looms at Chaco Culture National Historical Park, which is surrounded by Navajo lands in northwest New Mexico (photo left). Activist Nicole Horseherder, who heads a nonprofit that seeks to protect water supplies on the reservation, stands on a ridge near Black Mesa in northern Arizona, the site of past disputes over coal mining (photo above).



## The water guardian

**SHUNGOPAVI, ARIZ.**

**A** year ago, on a chilly December morning, Nicole Horseherder marked an explosive turning point in her long battle against coal mining. Standing on a slope overlooking the towering smokestacks of the coal-fired Navajo Generating Station in northern Arizona, Ms. Horseherder set her cellphone on livestream and gazed at the 775-foot monoliths glowing in the sunrise a mile away.

The stacks had been a landmark of the high desert for nearly half a century, symbols of fleeting prosperity and persistent pollution. The power plant serviced major cities of the Southwest and ran the huge Colorado River pumps supplying much of their water, but was among the top 10 carbon emitters in the United States. At precisely 8:30 a.m., a thunderous rumble shattered the clear morning and clouds of smoke mushroomed as 1,500 pounds of

dynamite collapsed the stacks. In the aftermath, an eerie silence gripped the crowd around Ms. Horseherder, followed by cheers of celebration from a handful of her fellow activists.

Ms. Horseherder had fought to close the power plant for years, though this moment was more a result of market forces than political pressure. When I caught up with her last August on the Second Mesa of the Hopi reservation deep within the encircling borders of the Navajo reservation, she recalled her journey's start. Driving to an overlook, she pointed north toward distant Big Mountain. For her, it stirred painful memories.

Ownership of the hardscrabble land surrounding Big Mountain, called Black Mesa, had long been an unresolved intertribal treaty issue. It remained in limbo until the 1950s and '60s, when a

**NICOLE HORSEHERDER** CONTINUES ON PAGE 20

Utah lawyer named John Boyden persuaded a minority of Hopi litigants to take it to court.

True to its name, Black Mesa is underlain by rich coal seams. It is also sacred to the Navajos and Hopis, many of whom opposed outsiders tapping their minerals. But the lawsuit prevailed, eventually forcing the removal of some 10,000 Navajo residents while dividing mineral rights equally between the tribes. Boyden subsequently leased land and mineral rights for Peabody coal company. A half-century of coal mining and environmental controversy ensued.

Ms. Horseherder's epiphany came when she returned home from Vancouver, British Columbia, with a master's degree in the 1990s and discovered that her dream of leading a pastoral life had turned to dust. The springs that her family's livestock depended on had run dry. "My whole attention and focus shifted," says Ms. Horseherder. "It became, 'How am I going to protect the place where I live – how am I going to bring the water back? And where did the water go in the first place?'"

Ms. Horseherder became a vocal activist and founded Tó Nizhóní Ání, or Sacred Water Speaks. At the time, Peabody was pumping billions of gallons of water from deep aquifers, mixing it with pulverized coal, and sending the slurry through 273 miles of pipeline to a Nevada power plant. It assured tribal officials that the technology was safe, and many supported the operation because coal mining was a pillar of the Navajo and Hopi economies for nearly 50 years, providing tax revenues and well-paying jobs.

**"My whole attention and focus shifted. It became, 'How am I going to protect the place where I live – how am I going to bring the water back?'"**

– Nicole Horseherder, head of an organization pushing for new energy policies and water protection in the Navajo Nation

But environmentalists contended that depressurizing the aquifer was lowering the water table. While Ms. Horseherder fought Peabody for years – and others lost scores of animals to stock ponds they said were tainted by slurry – the power plant and related activities were only closed when the economics of the operations no longer worked. Wells never recovered, and impacts endure to this day, critics say. "What we'd like to see them do first," she says, "is fully reclaim those lands that they've mined, and reclaim the water as well. Right now, we can't even get Peabody to talk to us."

Peabody officials say they have reclaimed three-quarters of the land and vow to finish the task by 2027.

Having recently met with U.S. Sens. Mark Kelly and Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona, Ms. Horseherder is hopeful that the exposed land of the defunct mines will eventually be fully restored, preventing wind and rain from spreading toxic dust and heavy metals. "I want to see the Navajo Nation take a really aggressive move toward energy standards and a more intentional move away from fossil fuel," she says. "We just have to stop making stupid decisions." ■

## Fighting fracking, one methane leak at a time

LYBROOK, N.M.

When Kendra Pinto moved back to Navajo Nation in 2014 after three years in Chicago, she was shocked by what she found. While the coal industry had all but vanished on the western half of the reservation, oil and gas were booming in the east – and doing so with a technology called fracking.

"There was more noise; there was more traffic," Ms. Pinto recalls. "What got my blood boiling was when I went on my favorite horse trail from my house. It's beautiful there. You can see everything – all the way to Fajada Butte in Chaco [Culture National Historical Park]. In 2015, they cleared out a big section right in the middle of the trail, 5 acres."

Ms. Pinto had grown up with oil drilling, but nothing on this



scale. Instead of small concrete pads with squat, grasshopper pump jacks, large swaths of land were scraped clean as construction teams cut triple-wide roads through remote backcountry and poured broad concrete plazas.

With fracking in full swing, Ms. Pinto was incensed. Crews were pumping pressurized water and additives deep into shale formations to force oil and gas to the surface. The returned water contained a cocktail of drilling chemicals, yet last year the Bureau of Land Management revealed plans to expand drilling across the region, which was already 92% leased – creating up to 3,000 new wells.

Joining with other activists and a local group called Diné CARE, Ms. Pinto soon found herself testifying before Congress – but not before being arrested. In 2016, she went to Washington and participated in a small protest in the lobby of the Department of the Interior, carrying a “keep it in the ground” petition.

“It was my first action ever,” Ms. Pinto says. “It was about making a statement. We’re struggling out here, and D.C. needs to hear that.”

She and 10 other women from around the country were hand-

cuffed, charged with a felony, and bundled into six black SUVs, with four motorcycles in front and two in back.

“They were driving us to the police station; all of the traffic was cleared, and we see everyone filming us. They were probably thinking it was somebody important. They had no idea it was just someone from the reservation.”

Important or not, Ms. Pinto returned home a changed woman. With help from various environmental groups, she began tracking methane leaks at abandoned gas wells that have proliferated as companies have moved drilling operations into the area for short periods of time and then left.

“If we can track a well site and something happens there, we have proof that it’s been having a problem that should have been taken care of,” she says. “That happens a lot around here. Out of sight, out of mind. There’s rarely oversight out here.”

In 2016 in the nearby community of Nageezi, New Mexico, something did happen, but its cause is a mystery. Late on a July evening, flames suddenly erupted amid six active oil wells, spreading across

36 tanks containing 1,800 gallons of crude oil and sending billowing black smoke skyward for days. Despite the mishap, most residents of Nageezi support new drilling leases since oil and gas provide them with valuable royalty checks. Ms. Pinto remains undeterred.

“There are those who think what I’m doing is of no use,” she says. “I actually had an elder man ask me, ‘Why are you fighting so hard? The Diné people are going to be extinct in a hundred years.’”

The fracking industry faces threats from bottom lines as much as from committed activists. Before the current run-up in energy prices, more than 250 oil and gas companies in North America had liquidated between 2014 and 2021, according to Haynes and Boone, a firm that tracks energy company bankruptcies.

Yet even if the industry booms again, as energy prices rise, Ms. Pinto intends to keep fighting. She is making herself heard from the reservation to Washington.

“They’ve always put a price tag on our forehead, and just expect us to be quiet,” she says, standing beside one of the bold signs that she and colleagues erected along the region’s main highway protesting the loss of sacred lands. ■

Kendra Pinto stands beside one of several protest signs (“dooda” means “no” in Navajo) that she and colleagues have erected in northwest New Mexico in their fight against oil and gas drilling.



# Pushing voting, from the back of a horse

KIRTLAND, N.M.

**T**wo weeks before last year's presidential election, Allie Redhorse Young led voters to polling stations in a novel way – on horseback. She and other organizers called it Ride to the Polls, and they were sending a message to Washington about inequities on the Navajo reservation, where a dearth of voting stations, short polling hours, and poor mail service are obstacles to voting. Only 27 post offices serve the entire Navajo Nation – encompassing 27,000 square miles – and delivery is legendarily slow.

I recently met Ms. Redhorse Young outside Farmington, New Mexico, in a dusty town called Kirtland on the San Juan River. Wearing cowboy boots, a skirt, and a denim jacket, she climbed into the corral behind her grandfather's hogan, coaxing several horses forward. By her account, Ride to the Polls was the realization of her father's dream about Navajo riders saddling up to heal tribal divisions and her own dream of giving back to a nation she'd left years earlier to attend boarding school and Dartmouth College.

"Some people came from parts of the res that are in remote locations and met us there and then rode in with us," says Ms. Redhorse Young. "But it was really to make a statement – especially to Native young voters – that this is what our ancestors had to do and that, yeah, some of us maybe don't have transportation. But if our grandparents and our ancestors saddled up to get to the polls, then we should exercise our right to vote, the right that they fought for."

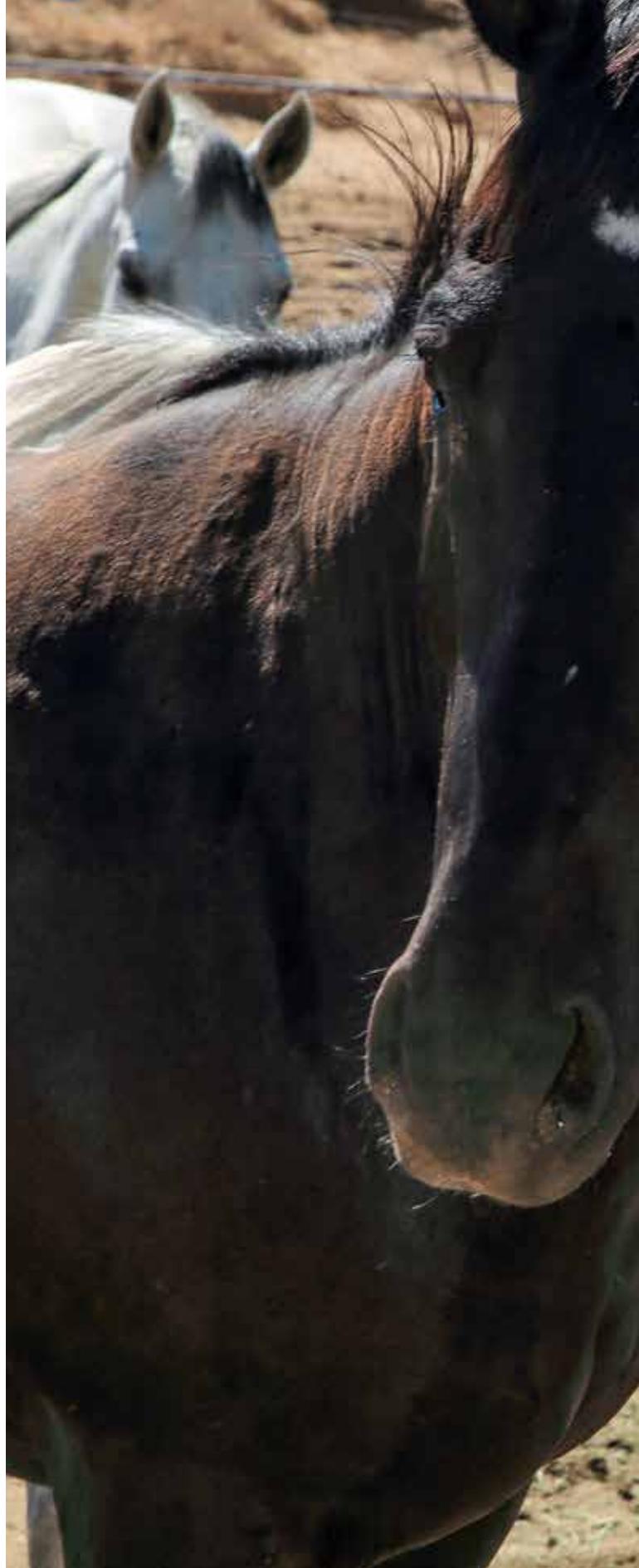
The first Ride to the Polls was Oct. 20, 2020, in Arizona, where her father lives and from whom she borrowed horses. With another planned the following week, Ms. Redhorse Young discovered that Navajo Nation polling stations closed 10 days earlier than the rest of the state. She ended up leading the second Ride to the Polls on Election Day, attracting national headlines. Diné and Hopi voters turned out in force that day, casting nearly 60,000 ballots that were overwhelmingly Democratic. Their vote proved pivotal in helping Democrat Joe Biden win by a slim margin of 10,000 votes in the state.

Since then, Arizona Republicans, saying they're worried about fraud, have passed laws that they argue will safeguard the system, placing restrictions on such things as early voting and mail-in ballots. Critics say it's just a form of voter suppression that particularly disadvantages voters in remote areas, like many Diné, with poor infrastructure, no formal address, or limited transportation.

Ms. Redhorse Young's new foundation, Protect the Sacred, in addition to promoting voting rights on the reservation, also supports programs that preserve the knowledge of Indigenous elders, dying languages, and traditional medicinal arts. "Both my maternal and paternal grandfathers are medicine men," she says, adding, "Those cultural roots are what brought me home."

Her work since returning to the res has been nationally recognized, including meeting in Washington with Vice President Kamala Harris two weeks before my visit to discuss Native American voting rights. She was one of just five Native leaders invited for the private audience. With midterm elections ahead, Ms. Redhorse Young worries about Navajo youth, many of whom believe that voting is akin to embracing white values.

"But I say, look at what we've been able to accomplish," she says. "[Interior] Secretary [Deb] Haaland is the first Native American Cabinet member confirmed – and by the administration that we put into office." ■



A photograph of Allie Redhorse Young, a young woman with dark hair, wearing a light blue denim jacket and large turquoise earrings. She is smiling and petting a dark horse's face. In the background, another horse is visible in a sandy corral with a white metal fence.

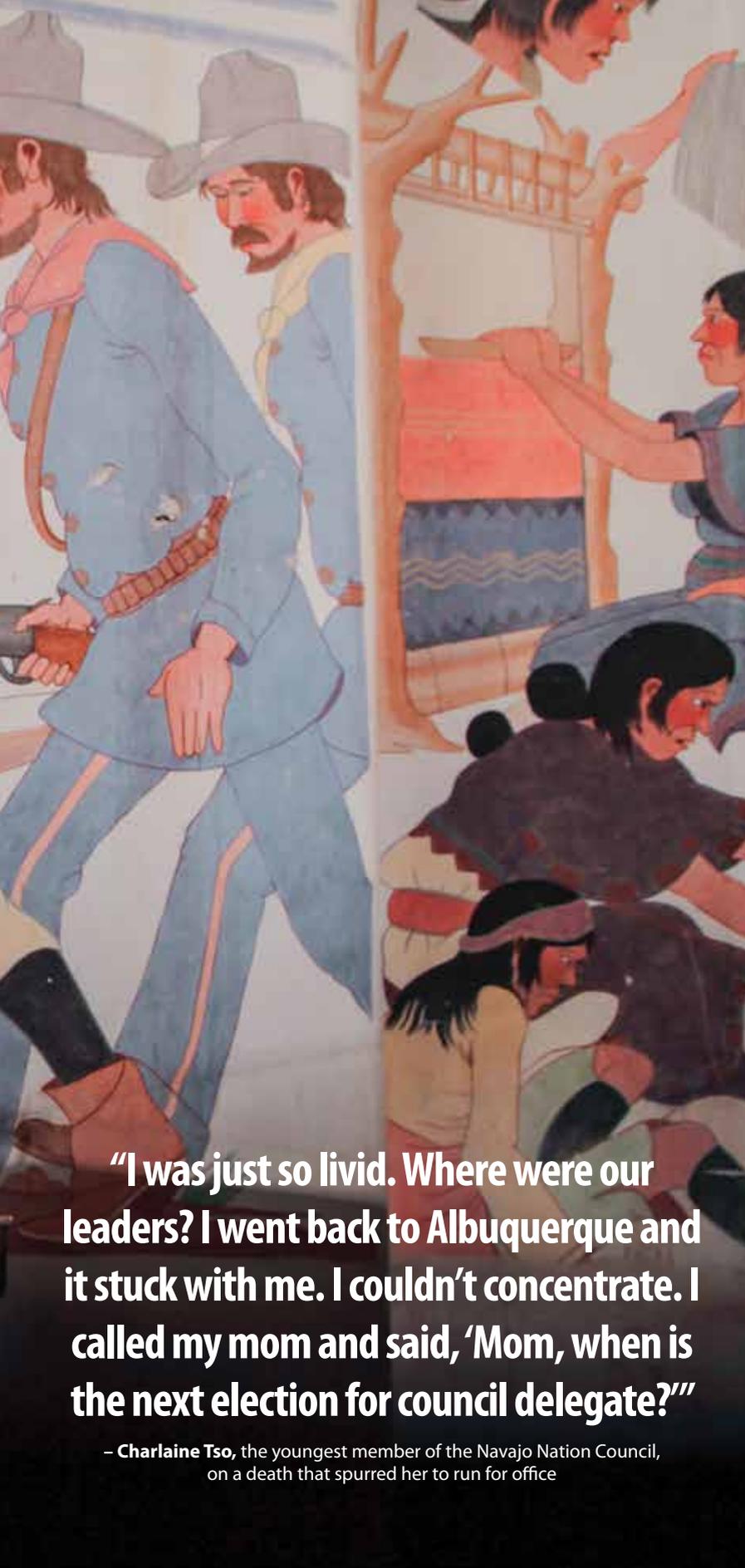
**“If our grandparents and our ancestors saddled up to get to the polls, then we should exercise our right to vote, the right that they fought for.”**

– Allie Redhorse Young,  
founder of the Protect the Sacred foundation

Allie Redhorse Young, who runs a foundation that advocates for voting and Indigenous rights, has organized drives to get Navajos to the polls on horseback.



Charlaine Tso, one of only three women on the Navajo Nation Council, stands near a mural in the body's chambers in Window Rock, Arizona.



**“I was just so livid. Where were our leaders? I went back to Albuquerque and it stuck with me. I couldn’t concentrate. I called my mom and said, ‘Mom, when is the next election for council delegate?’”**

– Charlaine Tso, the youngest member of the Navajo Nation Council, on a death that spurred her to run for office

## Out of tragedy, a passion for helping

RED MESA, ARIZ.

Charlaine Tso, a delegate on the Navajo Nation Council, knows what remote is, and I get a taste of it following her for half an hour on red-dust roads that crisscross the hard-baked land of the Southwest.

When we finally arrive below a line of soaring mesas, Ms. Tso sits outside her modest home describing her childhood in a household led by her mother and grandmother, who is still active at 103 years of age.

As a school principal, her mother would drive 90 minutes to work every day while Ms. Tso helped her grandmother herd sheep. She eventually attended her mother’s school and saw leadership close up, returning each evening to a home with no electricity or running water – as is true for more than 30% of the Navajo reservation today.

“It wasn’t until I left for college that we got electricity,” says Ms. Tso. “And water we didn’t receive until my junior year in high school. We hauled water from the windmills. It was very tough.”

Ms. Tso faced a new kind of hardship upon graduation. Shortly after her return home, a drunken driver hit her head-on along the same highway we had just been traveling. She was bedridden for months, found Christianity, and regained her mobility.

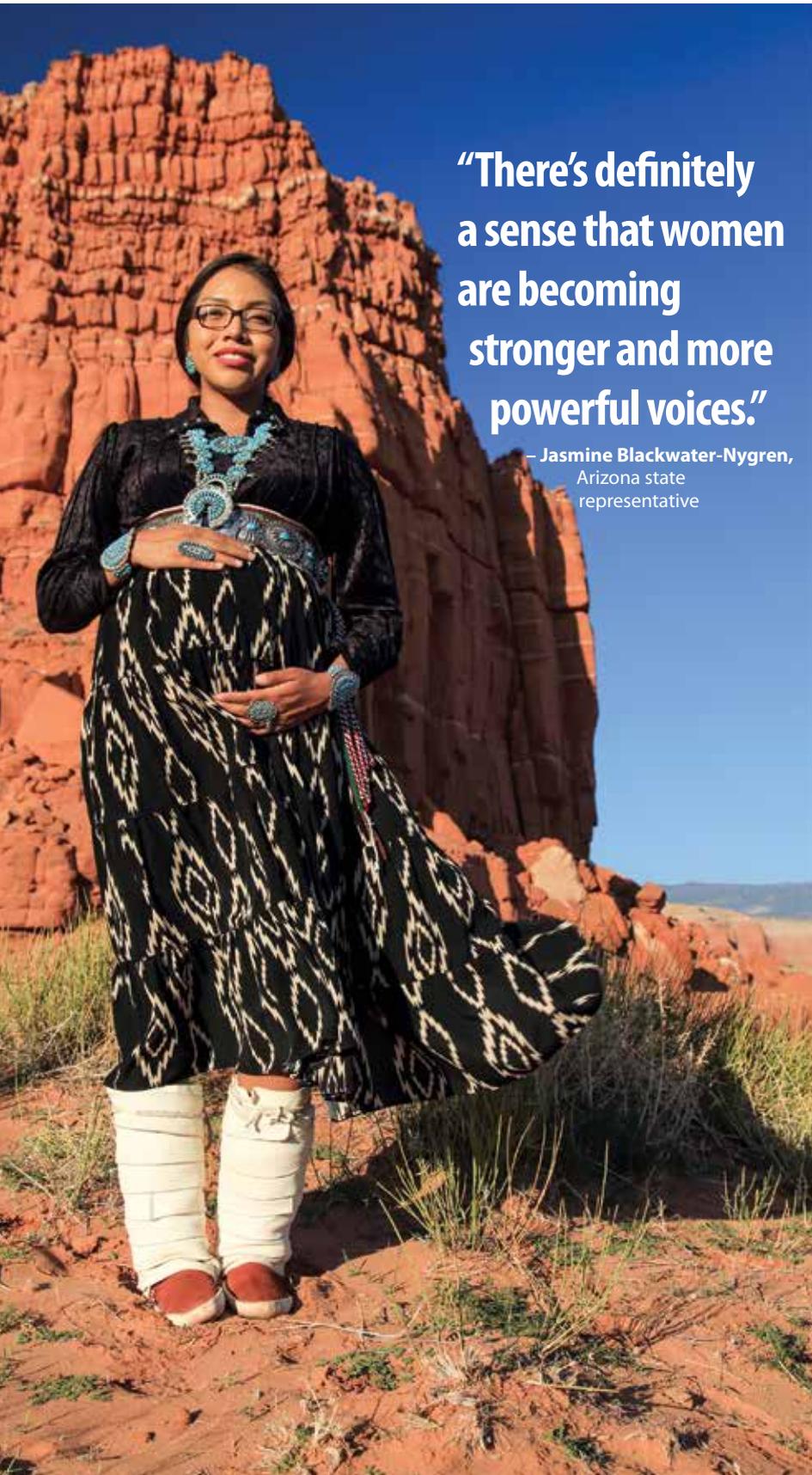
Several years later another tragedy prompted her to run for office. In her district, a harsh winter storm marooned an older woman in a remote home with no food and no firewood. Days after the weather cleared, her relatives found her frozen to death. Ms. Tso learned of the tragedy the next weekend while visiting from Albuquerque, New Mexico.

“I was, like, firewood? So much money is given to our tribe as assistance to our elders and our seniors. I was just so livid. Where were our leaders? I went back to Albuquerque and it stuck with me. I couldn’t concentrate. I called my mom and said, ‘Mom, when is the next election for council delegate?’”

With fluency in Navajo, she attracted many elders and prevailed in 2019 against three male candidates to become the youngest of only three women on the 24-member Navajo Nation Council, the highest body on the reservation.

While some of her votes in the Navajo capital of Window Rock have invited criticism, she is steadfast in championing issues such as elder care, missing and abused Native women, and education. She rails about federal pandemic funding that remains unspent because of infighting on the tribal council, and then makes a bold prediction about the place of women on the reservation.

“Once it all comes crumbling down, there will be one woman that will be elected to the Navajo Nation,” she says. “It’ll be history and she will turn everything around. That’s what has been told by our elders.” ■



**“There’s definitely a sense that women are becoming stronger and more powerful voices.”**

— Jasmine Blackwater-Nygren,  
Arizona state representative

## A champion of Native rights

SWEETWATER, ARIZ.

**D**ressed in resplendent Navajo garments, Arizona state Rep. Jasmine Blackwater-Nygren stands before a towering mesa as it burns brilliant red against a cobalt sky in the setting sun. She is on her grandmother’s land – a refuge for her after months of political wrangling in Phoenix. Her grandmother, who never attended school, looms as an inspiration.

“As the eldest, she stayed home and had to herd sheep and take care of the family,” says Ms. Blackwater-Nygren. “She watched all of her younger siblings go on to high school and college and become teachers and nurses in the community, so in her mind she feels like she missed out on that opportunity to be something.”

Her grandmother’s sacrifice encouraged Ms. Blackwater-Nygren to get an undergraduate degree from Stanford University, go to law school, and pass the Arizona bar exam. She became the youngest member of the Arizona House of Representatives when she was appointed to the seat vacated by Arlando Teller, a member of the Navajo Nation, who resigned in January to join the Biden administration. She is a champion of education for Native youth and voting rights.

“I knew that as a Democrat I was going to be in the minority party and that meant working across the aisle to get anything done,” says Ms. Blackwater-Nygren. Unfortunately, she adds, Republicans had their own agenda, pushing restrictive voting bills. “I spoke out against those bills. Native American voters across the board have the lowest voter turnout, period, of any minority group, and any voter suppression bill will only exacerbate that disparity.”

Ms. Blackwater-Nygren wants to expand Native-owned solar energy projects. She also shepherded a bill through the House, which the governor has signed, allowing Native students to wear traditional attire at high school commencements. Mr. Teller originally introduced the bill after a Phoenix student was excluded from graduation for adorning her cap with regalia.

She supported another bill, now law, creating an Arizona holiday honoring Navajo Code Talkers, like her grandfather, who used their traditional language to transmit secret messages during World War II.

As a new mother, Ms. Blackwater-Nygren thinks a lot about her place in Navajo society amid persistent unemployment, substance abuse, and violence against women. “It’s that sense of taking care of the family, that role of what the Navajo woman is, and transforming it into leadership and communitywide positions. There’s definitely a sense that women are becoming stronger and more powerful voices.” ■

State Rep. Jasmine Blackwater-Nygren, who was soon to become a mother, poses beneath a red sandstone mesa near her paternal grandmother’s home in Sweetwater, Arizona.