

Student Spotlight Future Nation Builders - Lillian Samuels

Lillian Samuels, a Nez Perce Tribal member (Nimipuu), is starting her third year as a TNBL student at Washington State University (WSU), studying aging business management and hospitality for senior living.

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Before coming to Pullman, WA to pursue her degree, Samuels grew up in Lewiston, ID and said WSU was never her dream school when considering colleges. According to Samuels, it was only after meeting multiple leaders at a Seattle-based company in aging business management that explicitly encouraged her to consider WSU that she realized there must be something special about the university she'd never accounted for. Samuels said that she didn't know exactly what that something was until learning about WSU's Native American Programs (NAP) and began connecting with the staff. Samuels said she found it meaningful that the college offered resources and a center specifically for Native students.

"I actually felt like I had people who wanted to support me, wanted to learn more about me, had resources for me. That's what made me, for the first time, excited about coming." Samuels said.

Samuels said quickly after connecting with NAP staff she was encouraged to join the Tribal Nation Building Leadership (TNBL) Program. TNBL is a cohort-based model that helps Native students develop leadership skills and knowledge through four key components of development and achievement: citizenship, scholarship, stewardship, and guardianship. Samuels joined TNBL in Fall 2024, where she and other Native students took classes together to learn about Native history, tribal sovereignty, and leadership skills they can apply to help build their tribal communities. After two years in the TNBL program, she says she feels a strong sense of community and support she never expected.

"I think my opportunities to really grow and develop as a Native student here have been so special to me. I did not realize how much the TNBL community here would bring me into a family of people I thought I could be supported by." Samuels said.

According to Samuels, nation-building is an opportunity for all Native people to grow and connect through advocacy. She hopes to use the skills and knowledge she has gained to understand herself and her cultural history better while being more intentional about advancing the visibility and advocacy for Native people. Samuels says she plans to continue her education while using her strengths and experiences to contribute to the TNBL program and the WSU Native community by being someone others can come to during challenging times and creating a sense of safety so other Native people feel they can be heard. Additionally, Samuels says she hopes to see a future where all Native Americans get the opportunity for equal education and believes the topic of educational barriers for Native people should not be overlooked. Now, looking back on the two years of her college journey, Samuels says she is proud of the many

accomplishments she has achieved since coming to WSU. She is the current president of the Ku-Ah-Mah club. She is proud of the Culture Shock event the club helped collaborate on with other student organizations to showcase and celebrate the many cultural backgrounds of the WSU student community.

Additionally, Samuels stepped out of her comfort zone, became a nationally certified spin instructor for the university, and currently leads classes at the WSU Student Recreation Center. Samuels says she is grateful to her tribal community for helping her on her educational journey and credits her current success to the support she received. As a final parting message to the younger generation not yet in college, Samuels encourages them to seek opportunities.

“The word education or degree is looked upon just ‘school,’ but attending college is actually such a bigger experience in itself, and that's why I think it's so important that they too get to participate in this experience.” Samuels said.