

Steven Keiser

The special education teacher discusses the draw of teaching on a reservation, coaching athletes to state championships and helping students fulfill their goals

Forty-one years ago, I was offered a job teaching special education at a school on the Navajo Nation Reservation in Chinle, Ariz. At the time I thought, “I can do this, at least for a few paychecks.” I’ve lived and worked here ever since.

I grew up in Zion, Ill. I started at Illinois as an astronomy major, but I transferred to the speech and hearing science department after visiting my brother, who worked as a speech therapy aide at a school for the mentally challenged in Lincoln, Ill.

I enrolled in the PEECH (Precise Early Education for Children with Handicaps) program. I did my practicum with preschool kids who had intellectual disabilities. It was part of a federal project at the Colonel Wolf Demonstration School, which was this great training school within the University’s College of Education. They used a process-oriented learning model, which focuses on the learner. I have used it through all my years of teaching. When you think about the learner, you’re on common ground.

During lunchtime, I worked with children, teaching them how to feed themselves. An administrator who was observing asked me if I wanted to get a Master’s in education, and helped me obtain a scholarship.

“We taught the kids... that you don’t know what you’re capable of until you try,” says teacher and coach Steven Keiser, ’73 LAS, EDM ’74.

Steven St. John

While I was finishing my Master’s, I began working as a disseminator, traveling around the state, training teachers and writing curriculum. But I wasn’t really a three-piece-suit kind of guy. I quit after three years. I was tired of sidewalks and everything in right angles and linear thinking. I had never had been west of the Mississippi.

A friend in Arizona told me about Chinle Elementary School, which was trying to establish a special ed program. I arrived at dusk. When I walked outside the next morning, I saw mesas, cactus, crows—I realized I could go in any direction for two miles and see nothing but nature.

During my interview, I learned that my class would be taught in a double-wide trailer. The school’s director told

me that most applicants would hear what he had to say, look around and leave.

The next year, I became director of a federal project called Right to Read, training teachers and aides at local schools and teaching at Northern Arizona University. After that, I was hired at the Kaibeto Boarding School in Kaibeto, Ariz., where I taught life skills to severely [mentally] challenged kids.

In the early 1980s, I returned to Chinle Elementary. My aide was a beautiful Navajo woman named Dorothy, who was a great person and had a son. We got married and had two children, a girl and a boy. We had our wedding in our trailer. Her dad came, but her mom couldn’t. She had to stay home and take care of her sheep.

I also coached cross-country for junior-high boys. I asked a guy named Denny Paymella to help. We worked together and taught the kids that success depends on four things—your mind, your body, your spirit, your desire. That you don’t know what you’re capable of until you try. We had a five-year goal to win state—we did it in three years.

Chinle had never won a state championship in anything. Some of the boys had never left the reservation. To attend the state championship, we raised money with car washes, bake sales. Our boys won three state championships in a row. We began coaching the junior-high girls, and they won state three years in a row. The girls from Chinle High School asked me to be their coach. Denny stayed with the junior-high girls and won two more state championships. My high-school girls finished third the first year, then won state two years in a row. During the 1990s, I coached four state championship teams in all.

Doing all this was unexpected. I was presented with some amazing out-of-the-blue opportunities and was fortunate enough to partake and share success from high school forward: getting a scholarship to the “Big U”; completing two degrees; heading West; teaching and coaching; and being an enabler of opportunity for some, a creator of it for others. ■