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# Tohono O'odham Community College alumni are serving first-ever internships with Nation's attorney general

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**Interns Rodney Aguilla and Cissimarie Juan join Assistant Attorney General Alfred Urbina, who developed the internship. Urbina is a graduate of the University of Arizona Law School and is a member of the Pascua Yaqui Tribe. Photo by M. Lee**

*by Martha S. Lee*

**Sells-** Six months ago, Rodney Aguilla and Cissimarie Juan were immersed in American Indian history as they and two other classmates read book after book to represent Tohono O’odham Community College in a Knowledge Bowl that would take place at the annual student conference organized by the American Indian Higher Education Consortium (AIHEC).

Their American Indian Studies instructor, Dean of Student Services Naomi Tom, M.S., warned the students at the start of the course that they would encounter issues that would make them angry, history that would leave them heartbroken, and that they would have uncomfortable discussions in the course. All of this came to pass.

The TOCC classmates in AIS 200 Culture and History of Indigenous Peoples learned about federal mistreatment of sovereign Native nations, about the historical trauma experienced by so many and passed from one generation to another, and about the need for a new approach to handling child welfare cases, which led to the passage of the federal Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) in 1978.

Aguilla, Juan, and their classmates Alita Smith and Nacho Flores represented TOCC admirably in the AIHEC Knowledge Bowl in March 2018 in Bismarck, North Dakota. In May, Aguilla and Juan graduated from TOCC with Associate of Liberal Arts degrees. Both returned to their workplaces, planning to continue their usual work until the start of the new school year.

Everything changed on a Friday in June. Rodney, Cissimarie, and another friend were in Tempe at Arizona State University finalizing their registration for the fall semester, when first Cissimarie and then Rodney received calls from the Tohono O’odham Nation’s Office of the Attorney General (OAG). Assistant Attorney General Fred Urbina, J.D., telephoned to let each of them know that based on their resumes and application letters, they would be offered the first OAG summer Legal Internship. They started the eight-week internship on June 25.

In a recent interview, both Rodney and Cissimarie laughed when asked what they were expecting. Rodney says he anticipated an observation of the OAG, doing light paperwork and serving coffee to the attorneys.

Cissimarie says she thought there would be teams working on big picture problems like border issues and tribal gaming. To their surprise, the two interns were immediately immersed in substantive work that recalled their American Indian Studies course. While issues such as the international border and tribal gaming are indeed addressed, Rodney and Cissimarie learned that most of the OAG’s time and financial resources are dedicated to dealing with the welfare of Tohono O’odham children and families.

The two interns were charged to work together with OAG staff to develop a data management system that will tell the story of child and family welfare on the Nation. The system will collect data that will help the OAG discern patterns that the Tohono O’odham Nation can use for the prevention of problems.

As Assistant Attorney General Fred Urbina explained, the large number of tribal and state Indian Child Welfare Act cases being handled by the OAG affect a significant percentage of the Tohono O’odham Nation’s citizens, including the children, their immediate families, and the relatives and friends with whom they may be placed.

With this impact on the Nation's families and membership, it is critical to understand the who, where, when, and why of the ICWA cases so that family situations and child welfare can be improved.

Rodney and Cissimarie are learning how history, demographics, economics, and education influence family and child welfare. Urbina has arranged for the interns to meet leaders from across the Nation's government in areas ranging from housing to legislation and from public security to the challenge of the U.S. Census.

Midway through the internship, Rodney and Cissimarie could already see how their data organization job serves the bigger picture of children's wellbeing on the Tohono O'odham Nation.

Cissimarie and Rodney appreciate Assistant Attorney General Urbina as their supervisor. Instead of just telling them what to do, he discusses the reason for everything. For example:

- What skills are most important for getting into law school—and for working as a lawyer? It is critical to be able to read and process information quickly; and to be able to express ideas in writing and with visual graphics.
- Consider casual Fridays. What if a case requires court attendance on a Friday? The attorneys and staff need to be dressed professionally to communicate to the judge and their clients that they respect the families and the court process.
- What do you do in your free time, and how is this helping you grow as a person—and prepare for the LSAT, the Law School Admissions Test?

Cissimarie and Rodney say that it feels good to be doing something beneficial to address the issues raised in their AIS 200 Culture and History of Indigenous People course last spring. Anger dissolves in the sweat of concrete work.