

A GIFT THAT WILL KEEP ON GIVING

Dakota Kay '19 is able to serve his Native American people as a physical therapist thanks to gifts to the Annual Scholarship Fund.

● Grit \ grit \ *noun* - firmness of mind or spirit : unyielding courage in the face of hardship or danger. - *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* ●

When searching for the definition of “grit,” one could almost find Dakota Kay’s picture alongside in the dictionary.

The path the 2019 Southwest Baptist University doctor of physical therapy graduate traveled to earn his degrees took just that – grit. But the path also is one that Kay says is not for everyone, and his story is one that has been picked up and shared by national media.

In what was supposed to be a simple show of appreciation post-SBU graduation, Kay posted on Facebook his gratitude to those who helped him along his college journey. His post received more than 19,000 Likes, 2,800 Comments and 7,600 Shares.

“I was so surprised,” Kay said. “After two days, I was getting thousands of messages. I’ve been asked to give speeches, write a book and do a film. I hate attention. I just want people to not give up. In whatever you do, give it everything you’ve got. The world is tough. The world is not going to feel sorry for you.”



football scholarship at Fort Lewis.

ALWAYS A CALLING

Kay knew since high school that he wanted to be a physical therapist. His mom worked as a speech language pathology assistant, and Kay would visit her at school. He was introduced to therapy through observing speech pathology.

“My mom also introduced me to an occupational therapist at school,” Kay said. “I saw what they did and got the idea. I had injuries in sports, and unfortunately, we had no PT – just a clinic. We had to drive an hour to the closest town. When I went to college, I had shoulder surgery and thumb surgery (from football). There was not a PT in town. I had to live with it and figure out what I wanted to do, succeed at and love.”

BEGINNING THE JOURNEY

Kay, a Native American who grew up on a reservation in Arizona, began his college journey at Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colo., where he earned his bachelor’s degree in exercise science with a physiology emphasis. To pay for school, Kay received tribal scholarships and a

And, while school was paid for during the fall and spring semesters, the classes Kay needed to take during the summer were not.

“I had a plan set out since high school to take these classes and stuck to that plan no matter what,” Kay said.

That “no matter what” meant living out of his car during the summer semesters.

“Durango is a tourist town and I couldn't afford an apartment,” Kay said. “Scholarships were not available in the summer, and I couldn't ask my parents for money. My parents have a lot on their hands. The last thing I wanted to do was put more pressure on them.”

LEAP OF FAITH

While an undergraduate student at Fort Lewis, Kay began applying to physical therapy schools in February his senior year, which is past the deadline for most schools, but he knew he couldn't wait another year to apply – for the sake of his family on the reservation. Kay looked at the remaining PT schools, which mostly were on the East Coast.

“I wanted to be around home – the Four Corners area (southwestern corner of Colorado, southeastern corner of Utah, northeastern corner of Arizona, northwestern corner of New Mexico) – around family,” Kay said. “I researched each school, their mission, etc. SBU seemed to be the one that stood out. The Doctor of Physical Therapy’s mission of service to the community lined up with my goal. I, too, want to be in service to my community.

“I looked at the cost; all of the PT school options were expensive and required a deposit, but I had no money at the time. I told the schools my situation and my plan of being a leader in the PT field. Only two schools were willing to waive the deposit fee – SBU and South College in Knoxville, Tenn.

“From there, I simply prayed about it. I didn't know what to do. I'd never been this far out of Arizona. I prayed and prayed and prayed. I took a leap of faith and that is how I chose SBU.”



required fees at SBU.

“It's the last thing I wanted to do,” Kay said of taking out a loan. “I was scared of it. I decided to take the loan for that first year and it covered that year of school expenses, but it didn't cover housing and food.

DIFFICULT DECISIONS

As he prepared during the summer of 2016 for SBU, Kay applied for, and received, tribal scholarships – but they weren't enough to cover his schooling. The Indian Health Service (IHS) is a resource that pays for school, in addition to providing a stipend for the student, but Kay did not receive the IHS scholarship that first year.

“I was lost,” Kay said. “I couldn't afford school and had no money. I asked the advice of the IHS representative, who said, ‘Sometimes, you have to just go for it.’ He said if I toughed it out for one full year, I could get the (scholarship).”

So, for that first year and with hesitation, Kay took out a loan to cover the tuition and

"I still couldn't ask my parents for money. I came to the difficult decision to be homeless – I was homeless before (at Fort Lewis). I decided I could do it again in Missouri. My mind-set was that my homelessness was temporary. I went to Missouri for a purpose."

With that mind-set, Kay set out for Missouri and SBU – prepared for the unpredictable Missouri weather.

"I borrowed my parents' truck," Kay said. "I was totally lost and emotional when I was turned down for the IHS. I prayed and prayed, and something told me to just go."

BEING RESOURCEFUL

Kay arrived at SBU a few days before school started in order to chart a plan for where he could sleep, clean up and find sources for food such as an outreach ministry.

"I learned to be resourceful, and I learned to look for places that help you," Kay said. "I would sleep in the Walmart parking lot. The YMCA knew my situation and was willing to help. The SBU Meyer Wellness Center fee was worth it to be able to shower.

"I would wake up at 6 a.m., eat raw Ramen noodles, take vitamin pills, go to the restroom to get cleaned up and went to class. My day was different every day. I would spend the rest of the day at the SBU library. When the library closed, I went back to the Walmart parking lot to sleep."

HELP FROM ANNUAL SCHOLARSHIP FUND

Kay had not shared his housing situation with anyone, but he did eventually confide in Aaron Weaver '08, former SBU DPT admissions/alumni coordinator.

"I went to talk to Aaron about school and to get advice," Kay said. "He was my unofficial advisor before I came to SBU, so I felt comfortable with him early on. I told him about sleeping in the Walmart parking lot, and asked him, 'Please don't tell anyone. I'm fine. I'm happy. I'm doing what I've got to do.'"

"Aaron couldn't live with himself knowing that I was homeless. He told Dr. C. Pat Taylor (SBU's president at the time). C. Pat wanted to see me and set up a meeting. He loved my story."

Through SBU's Annual Scholarship Fund, Kay was able to secure room and board, negating the need to sleep in his truck and live on Ramen noodles and multivitamins.

"I remember the feeling of a bed and wanting to cry – to this day I remember that feeling," Kay said. "The fund meant the world to me. I'm so happy they have that fund. In my time of need, that's what saved me."

SBU COMMITTED TO KAY

Going into his second year in SBU's DPT program, Kay applied for and received the IHS scholarship, which requires the recipient to serve in the IHS system for two years. His school was covered and he was relieved of that financial stress, so he didn't feel the need to take advantage of the Annual Scholarship Fund any longer.

"That was my plan the whole time, to serve the Native American people and people in need," Kay said. "That obligation was a bonus for me. Receiving the IHS meant that I didn't have to worry about taking out loans again. I could finally focus on school.

"That second year, I really started to excel. I truly became a student and stay focused. I told C. Pat I didn't need the Annual Scholarship Fund anymore, but he said, 'Dakota, we want to help you. We made a commitment to help you. So, even though you got the IHS scholarship, we're still going to help you.' I felt so thankful for C. Pat and SBU."

INSPIRED BY SBU FACULTY, STAFF

Not only did Kay receive financial support through the Annual Scholarship Fund, he also received academic support from SBU's DPT department through letters of recommendation to the IHS and advice.

"There is something about the SBU atmosphere; people don't judge," Kay said of the SBU culture. "They provide a helping hand. The staff and faculty inspired me; they supported me and were that voice of advice and wisdom when I needed it. They helped solidify that this is where I needed to be and that I truly could help other people.

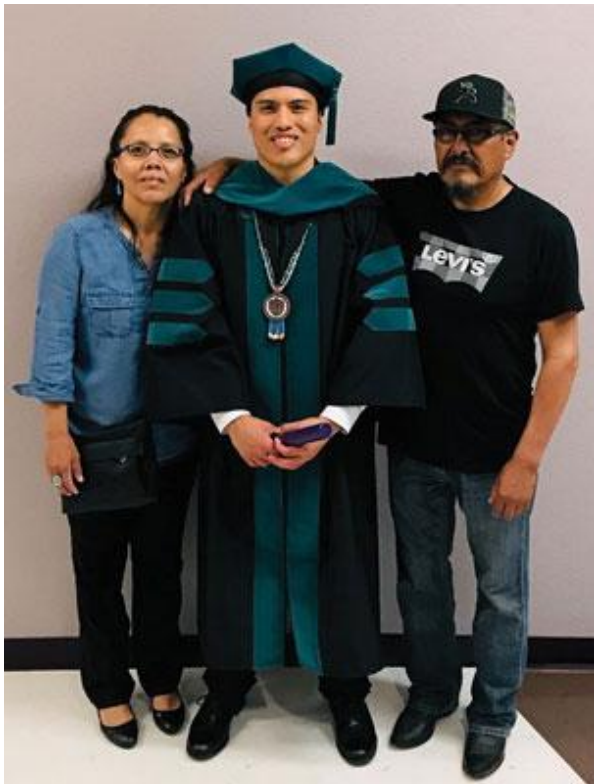
"The SBU atmosphere is something I've never really experienced before."

Kay's academic advisor Dr. Sarah Jones, associate professor of physical therapy, provided letters of recommendation and admired his determination.

"He's got integrity. Even though people are willing to do things for him, he's not going to take advantage of that," Dr. Jones said. "He's a very diligent worker, very conscientious. There are students who are here who are worried about every little grade, and there are students here because they desperately want to know and learn, and he was one of the latter. If he didn't understand something on a test, he was back in – not to argue for a point – but to say, 'I need to make sure I understand this.' That's always impressive."

Dr. Steven Lesh, chair of SBU's DPT program, said he never heard Kay complain about his situation.

"If he had complaints that could have been brought to my attention, he kept them to himself," Dr. Lesh said. "Certainly, DPT school is stressful and I do hear a lot of gripes and complaints. While I never talked to him directly about this, I believe he had a much greater perspective on life compared to some of his classmates. He had found his purpose in life and pushed through any obstacle that was put in his way. That is a lesson that some fail to learn." SEP



DRIVEN TO HELP, SERVE

Kay always felt a responsibility to help his family on the reservation and to return to help the Native American people. His parents' support has been the foundation for his determination to complete his education.

"There was always encouragement and motivation from them," Kay said. "They told me, 'Don't give up.' That's all I needed."

And, as part of his education, Kay participated in service projects, including the SBU faculty clinic.

"I did community service projects at an outreach service in Bolivar and in Springfield," Kay said. "That's what I like about SBU. It keeps you humble and is a constant reminder that what we're doing is to help people and those in need. When I'm home helping my people, physical therapy is just a tool I get to use."

Kay's work ethic was not lost on Dr. Jones.

"What I've seen is a student who was driven," Dr. Jones said. "He knew what he wanted to do and he wasn't afraid to do the

work that was required, and he wasn't going to complain about the work that was required.

"I think of his determination and grit; those are character traits that will follow him through his career as a professional. He is poised to have an impact on the reservation and on his people in ways that those outside of Native American heritage simply don't have. He has an automatic level of credibility that he can leverage for the benefit of Native American people, which I have no doubt he will."

SHAPING HIS STORY

In his Facebook post, Kay encouraged others to write their own story and to be an inspiration. Kay said that SBU has definitely been a big part of his story, in many ways.

“Without their help, I don't know what my story would be,” Kay said of the SBU faculty and staff. “They helped me succeed. I don't know if my story would be possible without them. They helped financially and spiritually and uplifted me.

“That was a big part of it spiritually; becoming a well-rounded person helped me relieve the stress and rest better. SBU helped me shape my story. I will bring that back to my reservation and help other people shape their story. Being of service to other people in the bigger picture may seem insignificant, but to that person it's the world.”

The gifts to the Annual Scholarship Fund make it possible for students like Kay to become servant leaders in a global society.

“I want the donors to realize the fund is making a difference,” Kay said. “It made a difference in my life and in turn helps me make a difference in others' lives.”

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