Early grad applies skills as cancer researcher

BY CHRISTOPHER S. PHILP

WINDOW ROCK — A Navajo student graduated early from Window Rock High School, but college brought a whole new challenge and fitted his skills against a deadly scourge of his people — cancer.

"It has been hard, because I know that this is a disease among many others Native Americans are disproportionately affected by... and so for me it really is an emotional experience, because I know that whatever I do here could have direct implications for my people," said Navajo student ... who graduated a year early in 2016. "That is inspiring for me," he said. "It will also give me a little bit of free".

Dang, son of a Congolese father and a Navajo mother, grew up in Kilteele, Arizona. He kept a straight A through his middle school and into his high school, where he graduated a year early after an appeal to the governing board of the Window Rock Unified School District. For the time he was at the school, he had 36 credits — far more than the 28 required to graduate, and had already been accepted at ASU's main campus and attending dual-enrolled at Dine College in Blanding.

He took his junior year at the University of Arizona, where he majored in biochemistry and minored in both applied mathematics and biochemistry, with a minor in Spanish.

His set out to maintain the same level of academic performance, but college showed the stresses of a different animal than his previous academic experience.

"I walked into my first exam... confident in my abilities and confident in what my results had been in high school, and that was my first exam and I had never failed," he said. "It was horrible."

He had to make a change. In his previous education, he had found that classroom time had provided enough to familiarize himself with test material. In his first exam of an exam, he learned that he had to depend less on the teacher in the classroom and more on himself in his study time and even free time. He would change his behavior as a result, and he would change his attitude toward school.

...everything rests on nobody's shoulders but my own," Dang said.

To shift his behavior, he would consider what he read in the class text and then explore a subject on more academic parts of YouTube, TED Technology, Entertainment, Design, Education Talk, or even buy additional textbooks to explore the subject.

"I tried through those different perspectives for a change, I gave me this really great intuition into what was really happening," he said. "I would read, I would share the knowledge, I would share the ideas, I would share the understanding that fact that you are doing this for yourself, you're bringing this knowledge of yourself, and that's really what changed between the two realms and where I am at today..."

Having taken this approach, Dang decided to pursue a career in research.

"I think that having different viewpoints and thinking about the problem in different ways is valuable," he said.

"I've always gone over asking the questions in the same way as people with the same basic assumptions about the world, you're not going to be always getting the same kind of answers."

A poster for the study credited Dang with helping to improve the student experience at the University of Arizona's Cancer Center, explaining how his work has helped improve the connections to genome instability.

"Genome instability is a hallmark of cancer, it's important to understand the connections to genome instability."

"Understanding genome instability, therefore, has real and translational implications for cancer research and therapy in humans," the section stated. Dang explained why cancer research might be better met by putting demographics and thought, like the perspective of a reservation-based Navajo, into the picture rather than just giving positions to high-performing students.

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