



LAEL ECHO-HAWK

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FINDING HER VOICE

In high school, Lael Echo-Hawk admits she did not take school seriously and could have taken a very different path in life. “I was running the streets, getting into trouble,” says Echo-Hawk. “But I had a good family support system, encouraging me to do something with my life.”

Echo-Hawk, a member of the Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma, grew up in Alaska and now serves as a tribal lawyer for the Tulalip Tribes in the state of Washington.

Throughout her schooling, Echo-Hawk was often frustrated by feeling as if there was little understanding about who Native Americans are as a people. “I felt my only way to fight back was to be a lawyer and use my voice to speak on behalf of Indians,” she says. “There are too few Native American lawyers in the state of Washington and the nation as a whole. We are not represented; our voice is not heard.”

Echo-Hawk never questioned her desire to make a difference for her community—but she did have doubts about finding her place among her law school peers.

“I never thought I was the type of person to go to law school,” says Echo-Hawk. “The first day I walked into law school, I was very intimidated. But I found some friends and I had strong family support. I knew I had to be who I was instead of trying to fit in.”

DEALING WITH CHANGE

Echo-Hawk admits the hardest thing about going to law school was feeling like she was turning her back on her old life.

“I knew that I wanted to be a lawyer, but there is a part of me that feels like I sold out. While I knew it was the right choice for me, sometimes going to law school felt like the ‘white thing’ to do,” Echo-Hawk confesses. “Breaking those barriers isn’t always easy, and I think this feeling won’t change for racial and ethnic minorities until there are more people like us in law school.”

But she is clear that she is doing the right thing—doing important work for herself and her community.

“We must continue to break down these institutional barriers and stereotypes so that the road to becoming a lawyer is not as difficult for the next student,” she says.

“It’s important that native people have a voice in the legal process,” says Echo-Hawk. “I know I’m giving us that voice.”