

## **Interview with Brandie A. Ishcomer**

I have been a management assistant for the Library Department for the City of Phoenix for about a year and a half. In that role I write and coordinate City Council reports. I work with staff about what kind of information to include in the reports. I work with our library advisory board to be sure they have the information they need. I also work on constituent issues with the City Manager's Office and the City Council and Mayor's offices.

I kind of landed in this profession by accident. I have always been a generalist. I have always been interested in a wide variety of pursuits. And as long as it's engaging and rewarding and I feel like I'm growing and learning, it's a good thing. I went to Mount Holyoke College and I majored in German Culture Studies and created a special major called Central European History and Politics. I also spent one year at the University of Bonn, Germany for my study abroad program. One of the most beneficial skills I took from Mount Holyoke was the ability to write well. While I was at Mount Holyoke I applied for a program in American Indian studies at the University of Arizona. I was accepted and offered a scholarship. I decided to defer enrollment for a year to complete a postgraduate program at the International Women's University. The university was kind of an experimental thing; it was truly international. That was an amazing experience.

After returning to the United States, I accepted my first job out of college as an administrative assistant at the office of the Provost and Dean of the Faculty at Mills College. It was a great first job, but I felt that I could contribute much more than the scope of my job duties. I kept asking my Supervisor if I could have more responsibility. I felt that I wasn't getting anywhere and I got frustrated really quickly. After nine months, I decided it was time to move to Tucson and I started a master's program in American Indian government and nation building. Many of my courses focused on good

governance, building infrastructure and how many Native Nations are using economic development as a means to better the community.

Even though I studied German in undergrad, I knew I wanted to do Indian studies. I'm Choctaw, part Choctaw from Oklahoma, on my dad's side. I didn't grow up with my dad being around, or any of his family. My mom left him when I was about three and then raised my brother, sister and I until I was about 11. My mom didn't have a college degree. She had her high school diploma and she worked fast food. She was working a lot and basically I raised my siblings. Then one day my grandparents came and visited us after they had moved out to California. They saw what was really going on and I think they were afraid that we were not going to have any opportunity to go anywhere. They thought that we were going to be stuck in that kind of situation. Somehow they convinced my mom to let us come to live with them until such a time that she could take all of us. Of course, that never materialized.

We always knew that our dad was Choctaw. But my mom didn't convey any of the cultural traditions of the Choctaw. She didn't have that knowledge herself. Then we ended up living with my mom's parents and they really weren't big on the idea of us being Indian. To them to being an American was more important than identifying with any ethnic or racial category. And so they didn't have the resources or encourage our Native identity development at all. It wasn't until I went to college that I started to find my place in the Native community.

After completing the Masters program, I moved to Phoenix. I was looking for work for about six months and that was very difficult. Definitely a piece of humble pie. I think of myself as someone who's pretty skilled and definitely someone who could fit in in a number of different places. It was really difficult to try to find a job and not find one. I ended up finding a job with an urban Native American nonprofit as a case manager. Native American Connections is a fantastic organization in Phoenix. They do residential and outpatient substance abuse rehabilitation for native and non-native clients. I worked at Guiding Star, the residential substance abuse rehabilitation facility for women.

So I was a case manager. I was there for only three or four months when I got word that the City of Phoenix wanted to offer me an internship. I had applied for their Management Intern Program when I was unemployed. I was in this terrible dilemma of having to decide between two good options. I could work for an organization that I really believed in but felt like I could contribute more than the scope of my job duties. I had never worked in case management or any kind of rehabilitation or substance abuse. I learned by leaps and bounds, tons of stuff, but Case Management wasn't challenging to me.. I had a degree in Indian studies, and it was a meaningful way for me to work with Native women . On an individual basis, I think I was helpful and effective. But, it was not my real passion, doing that case management type of work, so, I had to make a difficult decision.

I went for the management internship with the City of Phoenix. This is an internship which is widely recognized as a program for grooming managers in local government. It was a year long program. I spent time in the City Manager's office, the budget office and then the library. When I applied to the program, I was interested in going into community and economic development. I wanted to compare what the cities were doing with what tribes were doing. But I ended up working for the library. At first, I was kind of annoyed. I don't think I fully realized at that point in time what an important role the library plays in the community. It focuses on building literacy from a young age and teaching parents to be engaged in teaching their kids. The Library is a wonderful department and I had an excellent supervisor who is now one of my strongest advocates and mentors. She is someone who I would some day hope to grow into.

John: What would you say motivated you? Your passion?

Brandie: I think it's kind of a wide reaching thing. I have always just naturally been someone who is curious and who always feels like I'm two steps behind where I want to be. I've always been interested in justice, you know. And I have always been kind of a peacemaker in my family and my community. I've always been the person who builds

bridges between other people who for some reason aren't seeing eye-to-eye. My experience very early in life has helped to shape me--living with my mom who was struggling to raise three kids on her own, working fast food. And then, practically overnight, we were living with my grandparents who were established and educated and a little bit further on in their lives. They were able to offer us opportunities like playing soccer and traveling. They encouraged education. Seeing that startling difference made it clear to me very early on that not everyone has the same opportunities.

It's a real privilege.

I'm sorry I'm getting emotional about this. It's hard for me to have had those experiences and to realize that I'm now so privileged. I think that with that privilege comes real responsibility. That responsibility is part of what motivates me.

John: It sounds like you're now committed to city government?

Brandie: Well, yes and no. I didn't study public administration, and I didn't study business. I still can't imagine working for the same organization for the rest of my life. I mean it is just not me. But actually, working for the City of Phoenix you can work for the same organization and have a huge variety of experiences. It really is like working for small, different organizations within a broad umbrella. I don't know. I don't know.

John: How do you balance your passion with what the city pays you?

Brandie: I say I'm guilty like Kafka. I feel guilty! Working for city government you are really fortunate. You have opportunities to affect positive change in the community and still be paid in a way that's at least somewhat commensurate with your skills. I feel that my compensation is far and above what other folks who are doing equally good work earn. It's difficult.

It is a difficult balance. Making money is just a practical piece of having to live and take care of your family. You need money in case something comes up. You don't want to become homeless because that can easily happen. It is incredibly easy to happen.

I did the grad program in Indian Studies, to be honest with you, for personal enrichment. And it worked out. I always think at some point someone's going to say to me, "you can't move forward in city government with an Indian Studies degree." And I'll have to go back to school. But I'll wait for them to tell me that.

John: If you're trying to give people coming out of college or grad school some advice, what would you say?

Brandie: Never do anything that's against what you believe in. You have to be true to yourself and listen to your body's response to certain things. If you feel in any way uncomfortable, just don't go there. It's not worth it. And, don't feel guilty, like me, about trying to find those jobs that allow you to strike that balance more easily. And remember your privilege and your responsibility and how you contribute back and how you bring others up with you.

I would never do anything that I consider negative to the community, negative to the environment or detrimental to any person or people.

Hopping off of the city government path and going to work for a nonprofit that works with native peoples is not totally out of the question. In fact it could very well happen.

It comes back to the question of how do you affect change? You can't help others if you're not meeting your own basic needs.