

Creating a Circle of Support

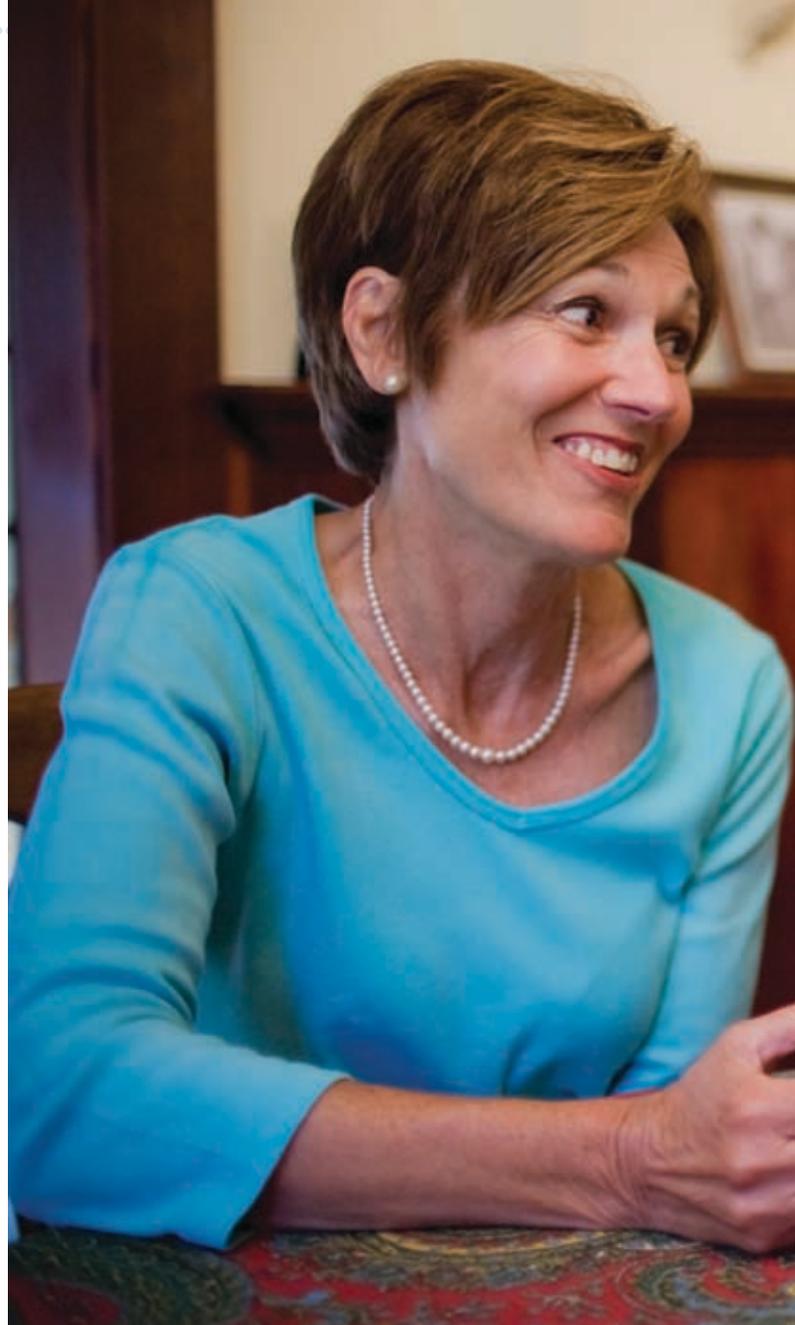
Whether within tribal communities or on the academic path toward her PhD, Kelly Gonzales sees the importance of sharing life stories

After Kelly Gonzales invited 50 Northwest Indian women with Type 2 diabetes to participate in a pilot study, she held her breath and hoped for a good response. The return rate of 50 percent — much higher than average for social science research — was an encouraging sign.

But that was just one happy surprise for Gonzales, a mother of two and PhD student in the Department of Public Health. The other was the spontaneous sprouting of what she describes as an “organic sharing group” in the tribal community library one morning. As the participants filtered in and began filling out their surveys, answering questions about their illness, their treatment, and their perceptions of discrimination in their health care, they began to talk.

“Many of them were feeling very desperate about their health and their quality of life,” Gonzales says. “They wanted to tell their stories. As I listened, I was overcome with gratitude for their willingness to share their needs and experiences with me.”

The pilot study was a test-run for Gonzales’ dissertation research, which focuses on 200 women in four Northwest



tribal communities. Hers is the first study of its kind to examine how self-reported discrimination in reservation-based Indian health-care systems affects medical access, diabetes management, and health outcomes. And a prestigious fellowship from the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Disease is making it possible. Her six years at the Indian Health Board directing a centralized diabetes program for Northwest tribes inspired her to investigate rising diabetes rates and health inequities among native populations.

Inspiring success

Another burning goal for Gonzales is to guide other Native American students toward higher education. And

"I never would have gotten where I am without her," says Gonzales (right) of public health professor Anna Harding. "She has nudged me, redirected me, and pushed me when I was feeling it was all too much. She said 'You can do it.' And I believed her." Harding (left) won OSU's 2008 Graduate Mentoring Award for her tenacity, patience, flexibility, and commitment and for approaching mentoring with discipline and heart.



Jan Sonnenmair

she wants to design programs that help nontraditional students achieve success in college. She knows all too well how precarious it can be. "I was clueless," she says of her first year at OSU. Without funds or family support, she started out sleeping on a friend's sofa, fending off her mom's pleas to "come home and marry your high school sweetheart." But many people along the way opened their arms to her in what she calls "lots of little encounters" that kept her going — offering academic support, steering her toward financial resources, and helping her land an internship with Senator Bob Packwood's office in Washington, D.C. Her awakening interest in her Cherokee heritage led her to OSU's Native American Longhouse, a cultural center, where she began to forge a sense of personal identity.

"It wasn't just the academics that I was learning," she says. "It was learning who I was and where my two feet were and how to stand on them solidly." With her feet now firmly planted, she intends to close the circle by becoming a mentor and role model for others. That, according to her mentor and PhD adviser Anna Harding, is the best of all possible outcomes. "The greatest satisfaction I get," says Harding, "is seeing the process go full-circle, where the students become mentors for others."

— Lee Sherman, *Terra* magazine
www.oregonstate.edu/terra



See the full story of Anna Harding's mentoring in President Ed Ray's online fall report at <http://oregonstate.edu/leadership/president/report/along-path-forward>.