

At long last, 8 from tribe fulfill their dream

Salt River group finds it's not too late to earn a master's

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It's about completing a dream late in life.

It's about helping their tribe have more role models.

That's why eight members of the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community, ranging in age from 54 to 72, plan to walk across the stage at today's Grand Canyon University commencement and pick up their master's degrees.



Irma Elaine Barehand Smith, 54, enrolled in the leadership masters because she aspires to become a tribal program director.

But it's not a simple story.

The group's journey began in 2001 when a tribal education director rounded up education credentials of the tribe's community professionals. Adult-education program specialist Billy Escue noted that 10 had taken college classes, and several were a few credits shy of undergraduate degrees. He approached people he thought had dreams deferred.

At first, there was resistance.

"I told him no, I'm not going back to school and I'm too old," said Sterling Manuel, 58, remembering the first time Escue approached him.

Manuel, a retired police officer, former youth-home director and Vietnam War veteran, got his associate's degree in social work and law in 1975 from Scottsdale Community College. He was one of the first three Salt River members to finish an associate's degree at nearby SCC. He wanted to study Indian law, but family, work and other commitments got in the way.

Escue refused to give up on Manuel and nine others who joined an adult online-learning program

offered by Charter Oak State College. The group earned their bachelor's degrees in 2004 from Charter Oak.

Not finished yet

But when they finished, Escue had other plans for them. He found the Master of Science in Leadership Program at Grand Canyon University. Last fall, eight Salt River members completed the program, qualifying them to go through graduation this spring.

"It opens up a lot doors for them: They could apply for other jobs in the community and also apply for jobs outside, and they would be eligible to teach at most community colleges," Escue said. "I also told them, 'Whatever degree you get, no one can take it away from you.' "

The eldest in the Salt River master's degree group is Hazel Rivers, 72, a library aide at Salt River High School. The great-grandmother married young and raised seven children.

With the new degree, she plans to run for the high school's governing board.

She considers her options endless.

Who knows, she says, maybe she'll run for president of the Salt River Community.

She also threw a challenge to her family.

"I told them, 'I dare you to do this, do it better and do it sooner,' " Rivers said.

Community sites

The graduates from the Salt River Community are a part of a huge group of Grand Canyon University students who combine online classes with traditional face-to-face classes.

The group of eight studied at Salt River High School, meeting once a week. Grand Canyon sent instructors to them, just as they do in other parts of the Valley to hospitals and corporate buildings.

The Master of Science in Leadership Program is designed for students who are employed by the private sector or operate businesses. The lessons provide a combination of theory and behavioral skills needed to lead an organization effectively, said Tom Skochinski, director of Grand Canyon's graduate programs in the Ken Blanchard College of Business.

Like other college graduates, days before the big day, emotions of the Salt River eight were in disarray. Some were scared about changes they would like to make.

Unlike most of the Salt River graduates, Irma Elaine Barehand Smith already had earned bachelor's and master's degrees. The high-school librarian enrolled in the leadership master's because she aspires to become a tribal program director.

"There are a lot of non-Salt River Community members who hold high position here in our government," said Smith, 54. "When Escue told me that, I said, 'Count me in. This is a chance for me to make a difference.' "

Honoring a wish

Even though Manuel resisted at first, he eventually signed on to honor his late grandmother Martha, who had a dream that her grandson would become a college man.

Manuel is the first in his family to clinch bachelor's and master's degrees.

With the master's, the case manager for Salt River's adult family services plans to ask for a raise at his current job. If it's rejected, he has options.

One is a chance to dust off a faded dream pushed by the wayside a memory ago - law school at Arizona State University.

"I've been waiting for this for a long time," Manuel said.