"It Gives Them A Sense Of Being Home": Utah State Blanding Celebrates First Indigenous People's Day

Kate Groetzinger, KUER

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Musician and actor Pete Sands speaks to students at USU Blanding. He grew up in Montezuma Creek on the Navajo Nation. All photo credits Kate Groetzinger / KUER

Students at Utah State University Blanding rose before dawn this morning to greet the sun with corn pollen in the Navajo tradition, before embarking on a 5k run to kick off the college’s first Indigenous People’s Day.

This year’s celebration was a reaction to questions raised by students on this day last year, according to Jessica Rouche. She is a student activities director at USU Blanding, which serves the highest percentage of Native American students of any college in the state. And while the school has not acknowledged Columbus Day in the past, it hasn’t done anything for Indigenous People’s Day either.

“I noticed on my social media feed there were mounds of students who were like, ‘Come on Utah State, you are in the Four Corners, and you guys aren’t celebrating Indigenous People’s Day?’” Rouche said.

In response, she surveyed the student body and put together a lineup of events including sheep butchering, beading, flute making, and guest speakers who grew up in the Four Corners region.

Third year student Hunter Warren is one of the students who encouraged USU Blanding to celebrate Indigenous People’s Day. He is from the Navajo Nation, and he organizes cultural events, like traditional Navajo games, for students throughout the year.

“It’s been amazing,” he said. “I know the students appreciate it, because it gives them a sense of being home and being with their culture. So that makes me proud to be doing this.”

Warren helped butcher a sheep this morning, which was served along with fry bread, potatoes and blue corn mash for lunch.

Students who aren’t from Native families or who didn’t grow up on the Navajo Nation can benefit from these cultural activities too, according to third year student Carmen Phillips. She is half Navajo, but grew up in Provo.

“I was raised in the city, and I never got the chance to be around a sheep butchering,” she said. “I get to learn so much being here.”

Singer and activist Radmilla Cody performs a song about family. She is half Navajo and half African-American, and a former Miss Navajo.

A Ute woman displays traditional and non-traditional bead work at the USU Blanding Indigenous People’s Day flea market.

USU Staff member Alina Begay shows students a non-traditional design she executed with traditional bead work.

USU Blanding provided students and guests a free lunch of mutton and fry bread. Navajo families often butcher a sheep to mark special occasions.

Jaquel Begay-Haudley cooks in a pot for mutton stew. The ribs were grilled, and the rest of the sheep became stew.

USU Blanding students Natalie Hunter (L) and Carmen Phillips learn the art of flute making from Ute elder Aldean Ketchum.
Utah Navajo Health Systems runs a website called WeAreNavajo.org to provide information about health and mental wellness. A representative tabled at the flea market.

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