



ERNEST FRANKLIN & MARILYNN KING-JOHNSON

The Navajo Nation's Army of Web Warriors Uses Digital Literacy to Rebuild Communities

Digital literacy, certified by IC³, helps preserve Navajo way of life and create economic opportunities in Arizona and New Mexico

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A Navajo legend may hold the key to understanding the plight of the Navajo Nation in keeping pace with demands of the 21st century.

The legend says twin brothers lived at a time when monsters roamed the earth, and people were afraid to leave their homes, work their land and care for their livestock. Concerned about these fears, the twins asked questions of the Spiderwoman, who educated them so they could journey to their father, the Sun, for help. As they traveled, the twins rose above obstacles and passed a test to confirm they were their father's offspring. When they met the Sun, the twins asked for his help to overcome the monsters in their society. The Sun gave the twins armor, bows, arrows and lightning. With these tools, the twin warriors returned home to destroy their foes.

Ernest Franklin, executive director of the Navajo Nation Telecommunication Regulatory Commission, said society-paralyzing monsters plague the Navajo people today, just as they did in this Navajo legend. Now alcoholism, drug addiction, domestic violence and loss of creativity, hope and identity have caused Navajo communities to weaken. To defeat these monsters, the Navajo have a new weapon: technology. With digital literacy training and certification as their tools, the Navajo are lifting the spirits of their communities and conquering their modern-day foes.



"The only way technology will be sustainable in the Navajo Nation is to create local support in the chapters and communities," Franklin said.

"For our youth, technology is their age; it's the computer age," said Marilyn King-Johnson, manager, Navajo Nation Department of Youth. "Their grandparents used the tools of their own hands to build and perform manual labor. This generation has its hands on computers. They can be computer literate and make a living by learning how to use this tool."

So Franklin and King-Johnson created a new kind of warrior in the Navajo Nation: The Web Warrior program trains and certifies the digital skills of high school and college students. In 110 communities ranging in size from 200 to 9,000 people, governments are rising and people are using technology to create and promote self-reliance. Leveraging grants from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Navajo Nation Division of Community Development partnered with Diné Education to create computer centers in each community. With satellite Internet access, communities established connectivity and soon built local governments, identified sources of funding and set goals.

As the program gains momentum, the Navajo Nation has helped to develop 10 Web Warriors while 40 percent of the nation's chapters have successfully created computer centers. Each Web Warrior has earned Certiport® Internet and Computing Core Certification (IC³®), the world's only globally recognized standards-based certification for basic computing skills. Still, there is much more to come.

"Our goal is to have five Web Warriors in each chapter—over 500 total," Franklin said.

"IC³ has been a blessing," Franklin continued. "It validates our Web Warriors and brings them trust from their communities. They know hardware, software and applications. They have the tools to make sure the computer centers run well in these remote areas."



Franklin said certification is an important component of digital literacy training for Web Warriors. "Before the twin warriors were given weapons to fight the monsters, they were tested by the Sun to verify their knowledge and experience," he said. "This certification process is very important because the Navajo believe you can hurt yourself if you do not respect the weapons given to you. Certiport's validation provides our Web Warriors the weapons needed to destroy the monsters that are killing the Navajo today."

"Instead of believing it's okay for their families to make or sell drugs, I hope our youth get in a different mindset and know there is a better way to make a living, it is possible and they can do it," King-Johnson said. "The computer is not foreign to them now. We show them they can make a living using it, they can be experts at it and they don't have to go someplace else to do it. All they have to do is want it."

With community involvement, local government and technology in place, communities are reclaiming the Navajo way of life. They work their fields and take pride in their crops. They use technology in the computer centers maintained by IC³-qualified Web Warriors to run businesses. They sell goods—rugs, firewood, even sheep—on the Internet, distributing their e-mail addresses to one another and to individuals and businesses outside their communities to offer an easy way to order product.

An e-portal, "enavajo.org," provides template-based, scalable Web site tools, with which all Navajo chapters have created Web sites. Web Warriors maintain the Web sites, update calendars and publish chapter news, pictures and information. Adhering to a code of values and maintaining good grades in school, they function as communications specialists in the event of emergencies. As they manage chapter computer centers, Web Warriors offer extended hours of public access, enabling their communities to use computers and the Internet to take distance-learning courses.

"This world is moving into the digital age," Franklin said. "In Navajo mythology, the creation story talks about the emergence of our ancestors from one world to the next, with each world offering new resources. Digital literacy is needed for the Navajo to move into the next world and to be prosperous."

Now the Navajo people purchase computers for their homes and minimize reliance on government welfare programs. Once again proud of and engaged in their communities, they are slowly eliminating the monsters afflicting their society.

"Bridging the Digital Divide while maintaining our traditions, language, values and customs is one way we will all exercise true sovereignty," said Dr. Joe Shirley, president of the Navajo Nation. "We believe we must maintain our sacred Navajo language, values and traditions, while offering opportunities for economic growth. Instead of sending our children off the Nation to get an education, we are working to use technology to bring education, job training and certification to our lands."

"I hope our youth are able to catch up to, exceed and surpass all of the dreams they have," King-Johnson said. "You see them with a faraway look in their eyes, but when you really start talking to them, you can see they want something better for themselves. Now they can easily obtain their dreams through computer literacy."

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