

Local recaptures power, identity through poetry at SEEDS

By Jason Morgan Edwards

Special to The Independent

SANTA FE — We are the SEEDS is not your typical arts exhibition.

As co-director, Tailinh Agoyo terms it, “One of our missions is to focus on educating the world about indigenous people, especially our presence today. One of our other goals is to work with youth, both indigenous youth and youth in other communities, to teach them about indigenous communities.”

SEEDS provides a platform for Native voices to control their own narratives by allowing them to tell their own stories, in their own way, using their own voices.

To that end, one of the more unique events during the weekend will be Rise to our Voices, produced and led by Nicole Kabah Johnny of Crystal. The Voices session will be an interactive workshop for indigenous women that introduces spoken word poetry through instruction and live performance. Its intent is to utilize spoken word as a tool for creative self-expression and empowerment, as words not only convey their thoughts, but also give light to their experiences as indigenous people. The workshop will allow participants to explore the beauty and power of their voices, and turn them into poetic expressions. Participants will have the opportunity to perform their original work on mic or display their words on the SEEDS Stage Aug. 19.

Johnny is born to the Towering House Clan, born for the Black Streak Wood People.

Her maternal grandfather full-blood Waters Edge Clan and her paternal

of Oxford. She is currently wrapping up her first year of MBA studies at Pepperdine University.

The connection

At first blush, there doesn't appear to be a direct connection between Johnny's background and the Voices session. But, she explains, “I love indigenous art. I grew up on the reservation (as part of) a weaving family. My grandmother weaved. And, I weave. My mom helped with the weaving process. I grew up with a deep appreciation for the art, knowing first-hand all of the work that goes into a hand-made, unique product.”

That background sheds some light on Johnny's choice of major. She was struck by difference in price between what her grandmother received from the trading post versus the price they charged reselling it. “It gave me a sense of, 'wow, that's really not fair.' They only paid my grandma this much money, but they're selling it for twice the price.

I started understanding the concept of how the business Indian arts operates.” As she progressed in her studies, Johnny gained a deeper understanding of the inequality of economics that exists. One aspect of SEEDS that draws her interests is that the exhibition offers the participating artists the opportunity to capture the true value of their labor.

Johnny relates her educational background back the Voices session in the holistic, Native way. The session will allow Natives, particularly Native women, to relate to their audience, directly, much in the same fashion as SEEDS allows the artists to vend directly to their customers, without going through an

to think about. How it's applicable to all tribes. And, that makes us think about where we'd like to see ourselves in the future.”

Johnny says she likes the spoken word format because it allows the person to freely express their ideas and feelings.

It's like a different form of storytelling.

Again, Johnny connects her role in the SEEDS program back to her traditional way of life. “For me, personally, I feel like it balances against my normal studies. I might be crunching numbers, and doing hard data analytics, but sometimes, with the stress of work, you just need an outlet.

You need some way to relax.

For me, that's through poetry and writing and expressing myself. That's where I think art comes into play. It's kind of like balancing your left and right brains. Finding that balance is what we're taught as Navajos.”

She is filled with nervous excitement at the prospect of leading the Voices session. She smilingly says, “I'm excited because I love spoken word. I love poetry.

I'm excited to see what other participants will bring to the table. I love to hear about their experiences.”

Full agenda information is listed at: [wearetheseedsart.](#)

com and [facebook.com/wearetheseeds](#)

grandfather is Tewa Bear People Clan.

She is a former Miss Indian New Mexico 2015, as well as a former appointee to Navajo Nation Commission of Navajo Government Development.

In addition to the Commission, she is in her third year of service on an advisory board for the Native American Finance Officers Association.

She also worked for five years for the Navajo Nation and U.S. Department of Interior.

The Crystal native earned her undergraduate degrees in Economics and Finance from Azusa Pacific University. She also studied Macroeconomics at the prestigious University

intermediary. She says of the workshop, "It's aimed at allowing Indigenous women a space and an opportunity to explore the power within our words. We see so much violence, especially towards Indigenous women. Whether it's physical, mental, verbal or in economic terms, it's bad to see it. But, we're now coming to the point of embracing who we are, as women. Being able to realize the power we have within ourselves. Part of this workshop is to explore that, and to share experiences as a form of empowerment."

She continues, "It's building the intimacy of sharing.

Sharing is not just a storytelling format, but rather, I tend to like the word choices that give you a little more



Nicole K a b a h Johnny, of Crystal, former Miss Indian New Mexico, will be leading a spoken word workshop during SEEDS.

Courtesy photo