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FEATURED

## An elected official who listens

By Terence Corrigan The Independent Dec 28, 2018 Updated Dec 28, 2018



Dawnafe Whitesinger

Terence Corrigan/ The Independent

With the new year about to begin, Dawnafe Whitesinger will be tested in her role as chair of the Navajo County Board of Supervisors.

With the looming planned closure of the Cholla Generating Station in Joseph City and its fuel source, the Kayenta Coal Mine, the county's property tax revenues are expected to drop by \$1.7 million next year and double that the following year.

County officials tried to make up for the coming shortfall by asking voters to approve formation of a jail district to be funded by a 1/3 cent per dollar sales tax. If the proposal had passed, the cost to run the jail would have been lifted from the sheriff's department budget.

But voters weren't having it. They rejected the proposal with a slim 156 vote margin of the more than 35,000 votes cast.

"This is going to be a very challenging year for the county," Whitesinger said in a Christmas Eve interview. "There are going to be some very tough conversations."

To prepare for the rough road ahead, Whitesinger set "professional goals" for herself in the new year. Whitesinger, an educator, has resorted to what she knows best — learning — to help her make decisions on what parts of county government can be cut.

Whitesinger, an optimist by nature, does see a plus side to the budget challenges. "It's an opportunity to re-define the county, an opportunity to streamline the county," she said. "I don't want our community members to feel these impacts."

"The community as a whole relies on county services," she continued. "You don't know you need them until you need them. If it's not there or it's delayed then you feel it."

County supervisors (two at time, to comply with open meetings law) are meeting with county management to figure out the least painful cuts. “Our meetings are not about taking away services or doing it in a poor way,” she said. “We want to provide quality services.”

As she and her fellow supervisors engage in trimming the county’s \$40 million budget, she said, they are fully aware of the need for transparency.

“At our last meeting, we talked about that. Transparency is so important. All the steps we’re engaged in the public should be aware of.”

### **Politics: The resolution of conflicts**

Politics was not a part of Whitesinger’s family life growing up. Her father, Don Whitesinger, a Navajo, is an art teacher. He taught many years at Holbrook High School and now is an instructor at Dine’ College. Her mother, Faye Cody, a White Mountain Apache, was a stay-at-home mom.

“We never talked about politics,” Whitesinger said. “Stay in your lane and take care of your family.”

When she was elected to be a county supervisor, Whitesinger, at first, didn’t feel she was well-prepared for the inevitable conflicts. “I wasn’t ready for that,” she said. “But over the years I think I understand more and more what that looks like. There is conflict and opposition in all things.”

Whitesinger’s way of dealing with conflict is not about pushing her own agenda, it’s about listening carefully to what others have to say and facilitating agreement.

“How do you create a balance? For me it’s all about being the listener. Making sure I have enough information to provide a valued perspective. It’s not just about saying things for the sake of saying things.

“Sometimes, as political figures, we become talking heads. Is that healthy for our communities? Probably not. It takes away from people’s value.”

“It’s my job to create balance. How can we mesh these ideas? I never feel like I’m the expert. It’s my job is to be attentive, to learn, to understand the issues.”

## **A story of firsts and goals**

In 2012, Whitesinger and current State Senator Sylvia Tenney Allen were the first women to take seats on the Navajo County Board of Supervisors. Whitesinger also notched two other firsts; she’s the first Apache to serve on the board and the first woman to serve as chair.

Whitesinger’s mission coming in has changed and broadened over time. Initially her primary goal was to build bridges.

“When I walked in the door it was really about creating partnerships between tribal communities and non-tribal communities, to be able to bridge the gap so we can understand one another,” she said. “I still feel it’s important for me to open doors that haven’t been open in the past.”

But, as time passed, Whitesinger’s goals have morphed. She now sees her role as representing people on both sides of the reservation boundaries. Her community now includes Natives and non-natives.

“More and more as I’ve gotten the opportunity to work with community members I’ve learned that people really care,” she said. Whitesinger said in widening her goals she’s enjoying “grappling with large ideas ... new and better ideas about industry and future job opportunities.”

Whitesinger again revealed her innate optimism although tempered with a note of caution.

“As long as people have an interest in serving I think we’re doing good,” she said. “But, if we have young people walking away and saying ‘I don’t have an interest in serving my community’ then there are concerns.”

“Do you care about jobs? Do you care about the elderly? Do you care about what your community looks like?”

### **A reason to serve**

Often the motivation to serve, to work in the helping professions, is the result of childhood trauma. Whitesinger’s life seems to fit that mold. Trauma, Whitesinger explained, is an all too common part of daily life in Indian country.

“Living on the reservation you don’t go unscathed,” Whitesinger said. “There are many challenges. My family, all tribal families. None of us can say that we have not been affected by alcoholism, suicide and substance abuse.”

Whitesinger avoided the self-destructive path but she’s not sure why.

“I always question what makes me different,” she said. “I don’t know if it’s just luck.”

Whitesinger credits her father’s path through higher education for showing her that success is possible.

Whitesinger’s college career started at Arizona State University, followed by a course correction at Mesa Community College, back to ASU for her bachelor’s degree and on to graduate school at the University of Michigan.

After college, she accepted a job with the Cibecue Elementary School where she’s worked for 17 years. Her title is Director of Instructional Programs.

Going to work on the reservation was a choice that was not clouded by second thoughts, Whitesinger said. “I’ve noticed that not everybody has the same idea, giving back to the community. I don’t know where that comes from. I’m there because I feel like there’s a necessity. I love my community and I love being there.”

Whitesinger began to serve the Native American community while in college. She served in Parents Anonymous, working with tribal children, with Native American families in homeless shelters, men who were in halfway houses or transitional living centers and “young people who were trying to find their place in the world,” she said.

The stories of the Native people she worked with, she said, “all had a common thread. All were challenged by traumas that existed within their communities that brought them to substance abuse and homelessness.”

Whitesinger believes that all people could rise above their challenges if they “had the opportunity to be exposed to somebody who cared about them.”

She chose education because she believes that it is the surest way for Native American people to “make something of ourselves.”

As she reflected on her life and her current role as an elected official, Whitesinger marveled some at the responsibilities she carries and where she sits.

“People expect us to be the voice of reason,” she said. “I never thought I’d be doing politics. It’s far off from a kindergarten classroom.”

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