

Indigenous Ranger Interns Augment Interpretation at Mesa Verde National Park

By Sarah Rank

Mesa Verde's Indigenous Ranger Intern program is approaching the end of its third season. Satchel Martin (Hopi), Jordan Fragua (Picuris and Ohkay Owingeh), Ian Bowekaty (Zuni), and Thomas Maddox (Hopi) have worked all summer as integral members of the Mesa Verde Interpretation team. These four Indigenous young adults have guided cliff dwelling tours, staffed the information desks at the Mesa Verde Museum and Visitor and Research Center, hosted evening programs at the Morefield Campground Amphitheater, and presented panel discussions as part of the Four Corners Lecture Series (4CLS). The stories and perspectives these Interns have shared all summer have enhanced visitors' and community members' understanding of these ancestral lands and the people who once called this place home.

Satchel, Jordan, Ian and Thomas performed the same job duties as their National Park Service colleagues while also serving as representatives of their Indigenous Communities. Park visitors who've been guided through ancestral sites by these Indigenous Rangers describe their experiences as exceptional, outstanding, insightful, refreshing and enlightening. The stories the interns have shared in these incredible places bring a sense of comfort, home, and welcome. They create connections to the people and families who once lived on this land. As Ian described, "These are our extended families, and they're still here." These Indigenous Rangers have been a part of visitors "bucket list" experiences while visiting Mesa Verde from across the world. They've been able to create awareness of the spiritual values of these ancestral sites that are connected to Indigenous people today, and of the importance of visiting with respect. Their tours are not just a lecture about cliff dwellings, they're much more than that, as is the other work they've been doing as part of the Indigenous Ranger Internship program.

During their evening programs these Indigenous Interns have shared stories of migration, strength, and resilience which carry on in their descendent communities. During their 4CLS presentations, "Connecting the Past, to Our Present, for Our Future", these gentlemen opened to audiences about their personal histories, where they were born and raised, their relationships with their families and Pueblos, and some of the conflicting emotions they've experienced during their work at Mesa Verde. They've been able to foster connections on a personal level that have helped others connect to their own histories. These men have enjoyed teaching people new things and weaving together stories that focus more on the similarities between people of the past and present, rather than on differences.

While these Indigenous Ranger Interns have achieved so much during their time at Mesa Verde, there is still more work to be done. Each of these young interns has expressed interest in coming back to Mesa Verde for another season to expand on the work they've begun and the knowledge they've gained. As Jordan expressed, "To understand us as a people is more complex than what archaeology alone tells us. It's hard and takes a lot, but there's things you can only know by being here". These Indigenous Ranger Interns are optimistic about the future. They would like to see an increased Native presence throughout the park, with the voices and perspectives of more descendent communities. Satchel, Jordan, Ian and Thomas have been providing Pueblo voices, but they'd like to hear Ute, Diné, and Apache voices as well. They've expressed a desire for sites within Mesa Verde to have native names, and for increased cultural sensitivity among all the Mesa Verde staff members. They would like to see more community outreach, more cultural demonstrators, and more opportunities for local artists both in the community and the Pueblos and Tribes to share and sell their artwork. There's also a desire among these interns for people who visit Mesa Verde National Park to come with an open mind, an open heart, and an interest in listening to the many ways of knowing the history and culture of their ancestors.

As these interns return to school and home, they're taking with them new knowledge and experiences that they're excited to share with people back home. Ian will return to Zuni with a better understanding of his place within his community. He is looking forward to being more immersed in the traditional culture and language. Thomas returns to Denver with deeper connections to his Pueblo roots. He's established relationships with his extended Pueblo family and plans to continue building those relationships. Jordan will return to school and home in a few months, and he's enjoyed branching out getting away from home and creating connections and experiences with people from around the world. Satchel has completed his third summer as an Indigenous Ranger Intern at Mesa Verde and will study abroad in Japan for a portion of the upcoming school year. He'd like to return to Mesa Verde for a final internship term. Each of these young men has worked hard to create personal connections with visitors, to help them understand the history of the Pueblo people, and to understand that time didn't stop 700 years ago when their ancestors moved away from Mesa Verde.