

Launchpad to a new life: Kiera Charley on track to fulfill dream of becoming a space scientist

By Marshall Terrill , ASU News
May 1, 2025

Editor's note: This story is part of a series of profiles of notable [spring 2025 graduates](#).

Kiera Charley's educational path began with a ceremonial blessing held at her home on the Navajo reservation. Four years later, it will culminate in a graduation ceremony at a 53,000-seat stadium in Tempe.

Her journey has led her around the globe as she evolved from being a shy teenager venturing out to college into a confident young woman ready to move on to the next chapter. She is committed to pursuing her childhood aspiration of becoming a space scientist after she collects her diploma in May.

Related story

[A student's journey toward the stars](#)

"I don't see myself going into academia and becoming a professor," said Charley, who is a [Flinn Scholar](#) and a member of [Barrett, The Honors College](#), and about to obtain her bachelor's degree in astrobiology. "I want to be more involved in research as a scientist whether that's working for NASA or a private company. I've also been looking into a position as a full-time researcher at an observatory."

Getting to this launchpad for a new life has taken a lot of effort.

Charley, a resident of Many Farms, Arizona, located approximately 15 miles north of Chinle, said her interest in the solar system was sparked early in her life during a visit to the [Lowell Observatory](#) in Flagstaff. She noted that Many Farms offers a breathtaking panoramic view of the night sky, allowing for an exceptional stargazing experience.

“My ancestors were always discussing the constellation, their creation and also their significance of how they can guide you,” Charley said.

(Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0y-Z4uDyC4o>)

Beginning at the age of 12, Charley attended Navajo Preparatory School, a boarding institution located in Farmington, New Mexico. During the week, she lived apart from her family in Many Farms, commuting home on Fridays via a school bus and returning to Farmington on Sundays. Each journey took approximately two and a half hours, and she maintained this routine for four years.

The hard and long hours paid off: Kiera won a prestigious Flinn Scholarship, which helped her family out a lot. The scholarship — valued at more than \$130,000 — covers tuition, fees and room and board at one of Arizona’s three state universities, plus study abroad.

Kiera was the 10th Native American to receive a Flinn Scholarship and has kept the promise she carried with her from Many Farms to Tempe, said [Anne Lassen](#).

“What’s remarkable is not only Kiera’s persistence, but her clarity — she arrived at ASU with a vision for her future, and she’s never wavered,” said Lassen, vice president of scholarship and education initiatives at the [Flinn Foundation](#). “Her pursuit of a degree in astrobiology has been defined by the same intellectual curiosity and tenacity that earned her a Flinn Scholarship, and she has consistently sought out opportunities that stretch her knowledge and fuel her sense of purpose.”

She is also a student of life. Charley embraced the opportunity to explore cultures beyond her own — first through a Flinn Scholars two-week seminar in France in the summer of 2023. It was there she reflected on the transformative experience of encountering new languages and ways of living that focused on sustainability and water systems, and how their systems could be adapted for use back home in Arizona.

“This program caused me to become more globally aware and expanded my mindset,” Charley wrote in a report for the Flinn Foundation. “It pushed me to experience a whole new culture, language and lifestyle, providing me with an opportunity I’ve never had before.”

This global perspective continued to grow during another study abroad trip to South Korea, where she spent the entire 2023 spring semester at [Hanyang University](#) in Seoul.

“It was a lot different than I was used to, but I enjoyed my stay there,” Charley said. “It was also really nice to have a friend from high school in the same cohort and exploring the country and seeing the sights.”

Charley also returned to Navajo Prep, where she spoke to high school students about the Flinn Scholarship, hoping to inspire them and remind them they belong in competitive academic spaces.

Charley has served as an inspiration to many, but it was crucial for her to have a strong support system both at home and within the university. Her family and relatives played a vital role in her life; she would communicate with her parents nearly every evening and visit them monthly in Tempe or Many Farms during school breaks and holidays.

"We wanted to make sure Kiera knew she had the safety net of her family, and has people in her corner who are supporting her," said her mother, Erika Begay, who works in Tohaali, New Mexico, but maintains a residence in Many Farms with her husband, Jeroy Charley, who works around the state at various construction sites.

Other enlisted relatives also pitch in to help with Kiera's two siblings — Ciera, 16, and Jeryn, 15.

"It's always good for Kiera to visit with family members who will encourage her with her studies and ask her, 'What's going on? How can we help you?'" Begay said.

Kiera's aunt and uncle recently invited her to dinner, where they took the opportunity to reconnect, inquire about her well-being and discuss her academic experiences at the university.

"Kiera was telling us over dinner about her work with NASA and what she was doing at school," said Roxanne Begay-Shupla, who is Charley's maternal aunt. "When we dropped Kiera off, my husband looked at me and said, 'I've never felt so stupid in all my life. I did not know one thing she was talking about.'"

Closer to home, Charley has another friend in Kaitlyn Newman, a business major at the [W. P. Carey School of Business](#). Over the past four years, Charley and Newman have bonded over meals, hikes, study sessions and movies. Newman said her friend has changed a lot in the past four years.

"Kiera has definitely come out of her shell since her freshman year," said Newman, who is from the San Carlos Apache Indian Reservation. "She's more talkative and social but is still quiet. We both have a lot in common and we have tried hard to fit in and blend. I think we've done a good job."

On April 11, Newman was seated alongside Charley, who was flanked by her parents, as well as her aunt and uncle, while she presented her thesis, "A Direct Imaging Search for Substellar Companions Around B & A Stars." The presentation, mandated by Barrett, The Honors College, lasted about 30 minutes. It also featured a 20-minute Q&A session with her instructor and the graduate students who made up her review committee.

Although Charley might have seemed anxious prior to the event, she navigated her presentation with remarkable ease.

Jorge Sanchez, who sat on the thesis committee, was impressed with Charley's presentation and her work ethic.

"Kiera was always on top of the research and very motivated to do the work," said Sanchez, a graduate associate in the [School of Earth and Space Exploration](#). "She was always asking questions, looking for ways to get ahead. It was exciting to see the progress she made from the start to finish, which she handled with a lot of poise and dedication."

[Jennifer Patience](#), a professor of astrophysics in the School of Earth and Space Exploration who chaired Charley's thesis defense, has known her since she was a first-year student.

"Kiera has been remarkable throughout her academic career," Patience said. "In my first-year class, students conduct a lot of experiments, and it's a chance to see if they are being careful scientists early on. Kiera was definitely standing out in that category."

Patience asked Charley to join her research team on the analysis of images picked up from some of the largest telescopes in the world.

"This was a dataset that we had to put a good student on, and Kiera fit that bill," Patience said. "Kiera was a standout because she was always well prepared, asked good questions and took initiative to help. She has a very good understanding of the field."

Jeroy Charley was also present for Kiera's defense and was perhaps more nervous than anyone else in the room.

"I have missed my child while she's been studying at ASU, but I know why she's down here, making good of her education," Jeroy said. "Once she is finished, she can do whatever it is she wants to do, but this is just one step in the journey. There's two more to go."

Jeroy is referring to the fact that Charley's bachelor's degree is one of many she hopes to hang on her wall, including a PhD. She's taking steps toward that end by rocketing straight into a master's program.

This fall, Charley will study astronomy at the University of Hertfordshire in England, about an hour north of London. Patience believes it's the perfect place for Kiera.

"I was a professor in the United Kingdom for five years and had a chance to interact with scientists at different universities, and so the group Kiera will be going to will be a nice connection to the work she's done here," Patience said. "We look forward to getting updates from Kiera in the future."

As Charley prepares the next stage of her academic career, she and her family appreciate the value of the experience at ASU.

"It's a pretty big milestone even though I'm still trying to finish off some major projects and take my finals," Charley said. "I do see it as a very big accomplishment, and my parents are proud of me and looking forward to attending all of the different ceremonies."

Charley's mother views her daughter's education at ASU as life-changing and the right choice.

"My young lady has developed into a woman," said Begay, who has a bachelor's degree in elementary education and a master's degree in early childhood education from Northern Arizona University. "She's been able to travel abroad, secure different internships and found a place where she fit in. ASU is where she was supposed to be."

ASU's Jacob Moore views Charley's success as a responsibility of the university and a promise the university kept.

"As stated in the charter, ASU is 'measured not by whom it excludes, but whom it includes and how they succeed,'" said Moore, ASU vice president and special advisor to the president on American Indian affairs. "Kiera is a shining example of maximizing the potential and tapping into the inherent gift in every student when given sufficient resources, support and opportunities to achieve futures of their own design. Thank you to Kiera's parents for entrusting us with their daughter and to Kiera for recognizing that she had a home away from home at ASU."

Lassen said Kiera's academic journey will also serve as an inspiration to others.

"Kiera is, and always has been, a student of the stars," Lassen said. "But what grounds her is her determination to rise while remaining connected to where she comes from, and to open the door a little wider for those who will follow."

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



Graduating astrophysics senior Kiera Charley prepares to defend her honors thesis, "A Direct Imaging Search for Substellar Companions Around B&A Stars," on Friday, April 11, in the ISTB4 building on the Tempe campus. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

Text image(s)



Professor Jennifer Patience provides feedback to astrobiology student Kiera Charley as she finishes defending her honors thesis, "A Direct Imaging Search for Substellar Companions around B&A Stars." Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News



Kiera Charley's aunt, Roxanne Begay Shupla (left), mother, Erika Begay, and friend, Kaitlyn Newman, chat after Charley defends her honors thesis on April 11. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News



Astrobiology graduating scholar Kiera Charley receives a stole at the statewide NASA Space Grant Consortium. Graduating seniors from ASU, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, NAU and U of A involved in space exploration received stoles to recognize their research. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News



Astrobiology graduating scholar Kiera Charley sits with her father, Jeroy Charley, and mother, Erika Begay, as they listen to keynote speaker Carlos Garcia Galan, deputy manager for the Gateway Program, at the statewide NASA Space Grant Consortium in Marston Exploration Theater on Friday, April 18. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News.