

ASU microbiology major is on an academic and healing journey

By Marshall Terrill , ASU News
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This fall, first-year student Kiara Bia will take the first steps toward earning a degree in microbiology at Arizona State University's [The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences](#).

It's an area of study experiencing rapid advancements and technological breakthroughs. But her reason for pursuing it is less about the exciting pace of the field and more about honoring her heritage and helping others.

"My grandfather Frank Smith is a traditional medicine man on the Navajo Nation, and he would use herbs and holistic healing to help his patients," said Bia, who is pursuing her goal of becoming a pediatrician one day. "Watching him was inspiring as I grew up, seeing how his patients felt safe with him and how he was able to accommodate them. My brothers followed in his footsteps and are also in medicine. This has inspired me to do the same."

Bia has certainly set herself up for the next phase of her journey. She graduated from Tempe's Corona Del High School with a 3.8 GPA, which garnered her several scholarships. They include ASU's [Leadership Scholarship Program](#) and the [Chief Manuelito Scholarship](#), which recognizes students who excel academically while preserving the Navajo language and culture. Her brother, Dr. Aaron Bia, ASU alumni '16, received the award in 2012..

Culture is important to Bia, who grew up in Canyon De Chelly in Northern Arizona but moved to Chandler when she was 4. However, she still goes back to see her grandparents, and to stay in touch with her roots.

"We go back for ceremonies, birthdays and when I'm on break from school. I really like being surrounded by my family and my culture," Bia said. "My grandparents keep some of the Navajo traditions alive. Growing up I would see my grandfather doing silversmithing or tending to patients. My grandmother Alice Smith was always busy weaving rugs and making jewelry. It connects me back to my roots when I come home."

The ASU Tempe campus can serve as a home away from home for Bia, said [Vickie Baldwin](#).

"[The American Indian Student Support Services](#) (AISSS) centers are designed to bring a 'home-away-from-home' atmosphere for Indigenous college students that fosters a sense of belonging, cultural safety and community," said Baldwin, senior coordinator for student success and retention

through AISSS. “The centers, located on each of ASU’s four campuses in Phoenix, provides physical spaces where students can connect through shared traditions, languages and values while accessing support tailored to their unique experiences. The AISSS team — along with other culturally informed staff, faculty and peers — helps bridge the gap between academic life and Indigenous identity. This nurturing environment empowers students to thrive both personally and academically.”

Taking a step in that direction, Bia attended ASU’s [INSPIRE program](#) for the past two years. Offered through ASU’s [Office of American Indian Initiatives](#), INSPIRE is a no-cost weeklong camp that offers high schoolers from tribal nations in Arizona a taste of college life.

“The program introduced me to some ASU faculty and fellow students,” Bia said. “I’ve stayed in contact with some of them and it’s going to be nice to get to know other people from my tribe as well as other tribes. I like having that connection.”

Bia said she’ll need a support system because she’ll be taking STEM courses such as chemistry, biology, math and a couple of labs.

“I’m going to really focus on my academics my freshman year,” Bia said. “But I’m also going to make sure to get the most out of my college experience and attend football games and various social events when I can.”

Most of all, she’ll be focused on what brought her to ASU in the first place: helping and healing others.

“I want to go back to my hometown because there’s a need for doctors on the reservation,” Bia said. “It’ll be a lot of hard work but it’s also a passion. I saw that with my grandfather. He helped people physically, mentally and spiritually.

“I want to be able to do that too.”

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

¹ Her brother, Dr. Aaron Bia, ASU alumni ’16, received the award in 2012.

Main image



Kiara Bia, who hails from the Navajo Nation, is a first-year student looking to earn her degree in microbiology. Courtesy photo