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Lillian Dennis attempting a 'first' for Hopi Tribe

DENVER, Colo. -- Native American Lillian Dennis is on a quest.

That quest is to become the first member from her Hopi Tribe in northern Arizona to complete an Intergovernmental Personnel Act Fellowship and gain the necessary training to help the Tribe establish its own auditing and compliance function to improve management of its coal resources.

"I'm not here to learn for myself," Dennis said, "but to learn for all the Hopi people. I'm a strong believer that everyone has a purpose in life. I believe my being here has something to do with my purpose..."

Dennis came to Denver in April after spending nearly 15 years working for the Hopi Tribe in Arizona. She initially worked in the Tribe's Contracts and Grants Administration Office, then moved to Management Information Systems, working her way up from a network technician to head of the department. She later transitioned into the Tribe's Finance Department and became a budget analyst for the Tribe.

"When I learned of the Fellowship opportunity, I was told that nobody would commit to the years of study and the move out of state," Dennis said. "So I offered to go," recognizing it would be a great sacrifice to separate from her family and religion. Dennis is the first from the Hopi Tribe to enter the program, which was started by the Minerals Management Service in 1985 to help promote Tribal self-control and self-determination over tribal trust lands and resources.

"I was a bit apprehensive at first," Dennis said of the Fellowship offer, and knew it would be hard to complete the rigorous course work while being a mother to her two young children. *(Dennis has been with her husband "Alde" since 1983, and the couple have a 5-year-old son and 8-year-old daughter.)*

Dennis, however, didn't believe "having a family...was a barrier." Nor did she fear returning to the Denver area where she spent much of her childhood, attending Denver North High School through her junior year before graduating from Winslow High School in Arizona. "It's hard trying to juggle family and kids," she says, "but I have family here (an aunt, uncle and two cousins) who help with babysitting."

The Intergovernmental Personnel Act (IPA) Fellowship Program is open to participants from Tribes, individual states or federal employees to assist Tribes and states with minerals management functions, said Floyd Gonzales, IPA Fellowship Coordinator at the Minerals Revenue Management (MRM) office in Denver. Participants develop audit and compliance experience and knowledge, and learn of federal, state or tribal functions with the aim of improving understanding and communication among the parties.

Gonzales said 14 individuals from various states and Tribes have participated to date in the Fellowship program. In addition to the Hopi Tribe, other Tribes that have participated include the Navajo, Crow, Cherokee, Chippewa Cree, and Shoshone Arapaho.

Completion of the program, in turn, can lead to cooperative audit agreements between Minerals Management Service and individual Tribes and states to assume more responsibility in the areas of compliance and auditing. Tribes that currently have cooperative agreements include the Blackfeet, Navajo, Shoshone Arapaho, Crow, Jicarilla, Southern Ute, Ute Mountain Ute, and the Ute Tribe.

States that currently have cooperative agreements with the federal government include California, Colorado, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Texas, North Dakota, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming. Gonzales anticipates that Alaska will become the next state to enter into a cooperative agreement with Minerals Management Service, perhaps later this year.

"There are a lot of benefits to the IPA program," Gonzales noted, "but there is a lot of sacrifice involved as well."

Dennis is prepared for the hard work and the length of her fellowship, which may take three to four years to complete since she has to pick up an additional 24 hours in college accounting credits. She also intends to take courses in geology, mining methods and mineral processing.

When done, Dennis has committed to work five years for the Hopi Tribe. "For me, that's not a problem. That's where I belong...that's who I am."

Dennis intends to help the Tribe establish its own auditing and compliance function to oversee the royalties the Tribe earns from coal. The coal that is produced on Hopi land is used to generate electricity at the Navajo Generating Station near the Four Corners area, or transported via a 300-mile slurry pipeline to a station across the Mohave Desert. She also hopes to become more involved in other Tribal issues and alternative uses of precious resources.

“I’m determined to finish it,” Dennis said of the IPA Fellowship, noting the support and help she has received from the MRM staff in Denver. “I’m not here to have fun,” she insisted. “I’m here to learn all I can, to help the Hopi people establish its auditing and compliance office, and help us in the process of self-determination.”

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