

Reflections from the Reservation

Category: At the Pharmacy

written by Caren Nguyen | July 1, 2024

On the precipice of starting my career, I packed my car and set out on the two-day trip from California to the Four Corners, to be a pharmacist at a clinic on the Navajo Reservation. Beyond checking patients' medications, I wanted to be engulfed by the people and culture of the region—its Red Rocks serving as a balustrade between my new community and the old life I was leaving behind.

Highway 163 leading to Monument Valley was famous as the place where Forrest Gump stopped and turned around. It also seemed to mark a transition point in my life; no longer was I a product just of what I had been taught, but now I would be taking into account the context and beliefs of a whole new way of life. Welcoming me to this new life were trading posts selling fry bread and Navajo tacos, which at once offered something both novel and comfortingly familiar, reminding me that I would be fine no matter what.

"What type of Indian are you?" a patient asked on my first day. I told her that I didn't belong to any tribe, that I was Vietnamese and had come to California at a young age. Conversations around managing cholesterol medications and techniques for injecting insulin gave way to conversations about my patients' lives: stories of refilling water, making turquoise jewelry, welcoming a new baby, and celebrating graduations suffused the consultation room. A 90-year-old patient regularly hitchhiked to the clinic every month; I was so glad to see him, I tucked some dollar bills into his hand and hugged him each time.

I sank into the deep feeling of community; the patients I met were my neighbors. A few days after arriving, I went with the home health nurse to one of the dwellings to visit a patient. My first weekend, I attended a pow-wow at the high school. I felt my identity shift slightly with every such experience and was overwhelmed not because everything was new but because of the variety of roles I could feel myself encompassing—my career (and original reason for coming here) dissolving as it yielded to the deeper connections being forged.

Medicine and health care often revolve around loss, illness, difficulty, and pain, but my everyday moments provided glimpses of joy, meaning, awe, adventure, and gratitude amid the rolling backdrop of Red Rocks Country. I knew then that I would always be chasing these feelings in my career and beyond.

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