

# The Calls That Change Your Life

by *Mary J. Pavel*

When I received AIGC's email asking alumni to share their stories about their education and the programs that helped them succeed, thrive and graduate from college – I thought about the calls that changed my life and set me on an educational journey that took me from Washington State to Washington, D.C. What I have learned on this journey is to take the calls and chances given to you, be courageous and surround yourself with people who believe in you and give you courage.

I am the youngest of six children and was raised on the Skokomish Indian Reservation in Washington, State. My educational journey began when my oldest sister started her freshman year at the University of Washington and I started kindergarten. My parents placed a high priority on education and being active in life and our community. But, they always said school was our job and allowed no excuses for not succeeding. Thus, one by one, my brothers and sister left home to go to college: University of Washington; American Indian Art Institute; University of Puget Sound; Bellevue College. There was never a question that, when each of us finished high school, we were going to pursue higher education. My sister set the path and I can only imagine the courage that it took for her to be the first person in our large family to go to a major university.

Growing up, I had only one dream of what I wanted to be. That was a nurse, just like my mother. My high school was a vocational high school, which offered a certified nursing assistance vocational program. So I began junior year of high school not only carrying all of the rigorous math, history, English and science classes that my parents expected me to take, but including the vocational training classes to be a nurse's assistance.

I did well in the nurse's assistance class; I believed it was my calling. When I started my senior year, I was still completing the clinical aspect of the program and my instructor asked me where I was thinking of attending college. I said Seattle University because their nurses worked at Providence Hospital in Seattle. I wanted

to work at Providence because those doctors and nurses saved my Uncle George's life but, more importantly, my mother, who had very high standards, had high praise for the care they gave my uncle.

My instructor said that sounded good, but asked if I ever thought of going to Dartmouth College (her husband had gone to Dartmouth and a boy who had swam with my brother also went there); I said no. She said that Dartmouth was begun as a place to educate Indian people. She told me the college hadn't done a very good job at it but, in the 1970's, that changed with a serious commitment to recruit, admit and graduate Indian students. I said, "I don't know, I want to be a nurse". She asked "Why don't I write and get an application packet for you?" I said okay; it was her time, not mine.

When the application packet came, she gave it to me. I immediately noticed that it cost \$50.00 to apply. I did not want to waste money applying to a school I didn't want to attend and was pretty sure I couldn't get into, even if I did apply. Then I saw the essays that Dartmouth required. I told her I did not want to waste the money or the energy on the application, when I could easily apply to Seattle University. She said she understood, but she thought I should at least apply. She even offered to pay the application fee. "Take the chance," she said. "You don't have to go, but just apply and, if you don't get in, Seattle University will always be there for you."

So, then I had to share with my parents that I was considering applying to Dartmouth College. My father was quiet and encouraging, but my mom was sad. She was sad that I would consider walking away from my dream of being a nurse, but mostly because I would consider going to a school so far from her. I was her baby, after all. But she did not dissuade me. She gave me the courage to apply.



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So, I went about the process of answering the essays. I still remember one of the essays was, “How would you explain humanity to an alien from outer-space?” My answer centered on the people who jumped into the icy Potomac to save strangers’ lives when a plane crashed into the 14th Street Bridge in Washington, D.C. I sought out the required recommendations. My English teacher, whom I knew liked me very much, was worried that I would not get in and, if I did get in, would not be adequately prepared to succeed at Dartmouth. Not necessarily the vote of confidence you want from a mentor. Nevertheless, she wrote a recommendation for me. I had other teachers who told me that I was wasting my time applying to an Ivy League school. This actually fueled my determination to apply and prove them wrong, but I was still not certain I wanted to go to Dartmouth.

I sent my application packet off, virtually certain I would not get in. Then a call on a cold day in February, 1984 came. The Dartmouth Native American Program Director called me and said that the program wanted to fly me to Hanover, NH to visit Dartmouth College. Well, again, I had to ask my parents and gather my courage to do a cross-country trip by myself. But my parents said I could go and gave me the courage to make this trip.

I arrived at Dartmouth and met the staff at the Native American Program and the students, many of whom I still know today. From the moment I saw Baker Tower, I knew Dartmouth was my place.

**My advice to people is: take the call; take the chance; be courageous and surround yourself by people who believe in you and give you courage on your journey.**

I went home. At this point I was virtually certain I wanted to go to Dartmouth. But, more surprisingly, I was sure that Dartmouth wanted me. So, I waited for the big packet—I knew from my trip that if it was a simple envelop the news was not good. My parents were very worried that, if I got in, we would not have the money to pay the tuition. In April 1984, I received the letter from the Dean the financial aid package that alleviated some of my parents’ worry. The decision was made; I would go to Dartmouth.

Dartmouth is not the place for everyone, but it was the place for me. I had the Native American Program and the Native Americans at Dartmouth. If nothing else was going right for me, they were always there for a laugh and support. College was where I learned about other people; how not to judge a book by the cover and trust myself in making decisions about my future. But, more than anything,

Dartmouth empowered me to be courageous.

Leaving Dartmouth, I wondered what was next. My mother, who loved Senator Inouye (D-HI), suggested I try to work for the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs. I loved the idea, but I had no idea how to do that. So, I sat in the NAD Office with my good friend, Geoff Blackwell, who asked what I was going to do when I graduated. I said, “I would like to find a job in D.C., but I don’t know how”. He said, “let’s call my Dad” (the legendary Charles Blackwell.) Within a month of that call, I had a job at Sonosky, Chambers & Sachse.

As a young girl from the Skokomish Reservation, I did not know who Sonosky, Chambers or Sachse were. I would come to learn later that these three men and the partners who worked at the firm are responsible for some of the most seminal decisions in Indian law. Working for these individuals, I learned about the law as a powerful instrument of change. In just one year, they turned a girl, who had no clue what she wanted to do, into someone who was certain she wanted to be a lawyer.

I applied and was accepted into the University of Washington. I was going home, which thrilled my mom and dad. But, before I went home, I took the path so many have taken before and since. I attended the Pre-law Summer Institute at the University of New Mexico. I had the privilege of being there when Sam Deloria ran the program and Kevin Gover was my Indian law professor. I learned from these men that laziness and complacency

is not acceptable. They taught me that if you are going to work in the field of Indian law you must work at the highest level.

I finished PLSI and attended the University of Washington School of Law. I had the honor of being there with Ralph Johnson, one of the first scholars of Indian law. He frequently told the story of the Puyallup/Nisqually fishermen who demanded he take their case. He was a great teacher. I was surrounded by smart and kind peers, who all seemed to love the law as much as I did and, while we may have disagreed, we learned to do so with grace and respect.

Finishing the University of Washington, I did not know what I was going to do next. Then, in the fall, another call came. Douglas Endreson called and said the partners had met and made the decision to offer me an

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associate position. I accepted immediately. The opportunity to work for the preeminent law firm in the field of Indian law was too much to pass up, even if it meant moving so far away from my family.

I took the chance and moved to Washington, D.C., in September of 1992, and began work at the firm. I became a partner in 1999. In January of 2005, my mother was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. She passed away in April of 2005. There is no other call, before or after, that changed my life more than the one that told me I no longer had a mother. But, before she died, my mom made it clear to me that my time on this earth mattered and that I could not let my grief over losing her prevent me from doing my best work on behalf of Indian country. So, while losing my mom brought me to my knees, I stood up and continued to work on behalf of tribes, because she gave me courage to do what was expected of me.

In 2013, I got a call from Senator Maria Cantwell. She was going to be the Chairwoman of the Senate

Committee on Indian Affairs and asked me to serve the Committee as Staff Director/Chief Counsel. I loved the firm and what I was doing, but this call offered me another chance to serve Indian country in a different way. I took the job and served the Committee for two years. What I witnessed in the Senate is that our elected leaders, whether tribal or federal, are dedicated public servants, who are doing the best job they can and that the myriad of problems they face every day would make the average person's head spin. From my mentors in the Senate, I learned the art of the possible and that sometimes you can get someone from No to Yes, if you work hard enough.

My journey has brought me back to the firm, working with the people I admire and respect the most. Looking back, it is the calls (even sad ones) and the chances that I took that made my life what it is today. My advice to people is: take the call; take the chance; be courageous and surround yourself by people who believe in you and give you courage on your journey. ♦