

# Wildcat Nation and Osage Nation unite



A doctoral candidate in educational leadership discovered he could pursue his life's passions — education and culture — while advancing these causes for indigenous populations nationwide.

"I am Osage, and I am a teacher," said Alex Red Corn, member of the Osage Nation in Pawhuska, Oklahoma.

Drawing on the expertise of education leaders in the Osage community and in the College of Education, Red Corn has collaboratively built a partnership program called the Osage Nation Educational Leadership Academy, or ONELA. Melvina Prather, interim director of the Wah.Zha.Zhi — which means Osage — Early Learning Academy, is the Osage liaison and a key contributor to the academy's design and delivery.

The program provides leadership training for emerging Osage education leaders with the goal of building upon already established professional education capacities, while also exploring how leadership in education can move Osage skills, knowledge and worldviews into the future. The hybrid program offers classes through K-State Global Campus with face-to-face meetings on the

Osage reservation and occasional student trips to the Manhattan campus. Upon completion of the academy, students earn a master's degree that prepares them to be leaders for P-12 schools with an emphasis on educational administration.

David C. Thompson, chair of the department of educational leadership and Elvon G. Skeen endowed professor, said this extraordinary opportunity was made possible by an extraordinary person.

"Alex's talent, expertise, deep knowledge and passion for the new Kansas State University-Osage Nation partnership are impressive and unbounded," Thompson said. "His drive and insights are the force behind the success of the partnership — it could not happen without him, and it is happening because of him. He is, in a word, simply an extraordinary leader who is bringing a mutually beneficial deep learning experience to both K-State and the Osage Nation that is without precedent."

Red Corn was one of four sons born to an Osage father and Irish Catholic mother. After moving away from the reservation during their elementary school years, all of the boys attended public





Alex Red Corn was one of five voices chosen for the college's documentary on social justice in education in its signature series titled "A Walk in My Shoes." Learn about the challenges Red Corn faced growing up in two worlds and his struggle to try and navigate an educational system that basically stopped teaching about Native Americans after the late 1800s while preserving his culture. "When I was a child, I knew I was Osage but I also knew that I was white and blond," Red Corn said. "I chose teaching because I realized its power in affecting change in young people, and I want to be a part of that. "We're fighting a school curriculum that basically stops teaching about the removal of Indians in the late 1800s," he said.

To watch the documentary, visit [coe.k-state.edu/walk-in-my-shoes/social-justice](http://coe.k-state.edu/walk-in-my-shoes/social-justice).



schools in Johnson County, Kansas, then earned undergraduate degrees from the University of Kansas. Now a married father of two, Red Corn is on a quest to enhance the education capacities of the Osage Nation and other native nations in a sincere and meaningful way through partnerships. After spending seven years as a social studies teacher in the Kansas City area, Red Corn is dedicating his research to multiculturalism in education with a focus on the needs of American Indians.

"American Indian students across the country and their respective tribal governments find themselves in unique cultural, political, economic and social situations," Red Corn said. "Some tribes are trying to save their languages by building their own schools and decolonizing the curriculum. Other tribes are partnering with local public schools and looking into alternative ways to reach their students by hosting after-school programs, Head Start and preschool, or providing resources for adult education. I'm interested in looking at the different ways tribes and tribal communities are trying to reach their respective educational goals and get a grasp of the settler-state system hurdles that lie in their way."

This fall, 10 members of the ONELA cohort embarked upon a two-year rigorous curriculum linking theory and practice. Thompson said the leadership academy model was intentionally created with built-in

flexibility to adapt to each district or organization's needs.

"The leadership academy model at K-State began approximately 25 years ago and at the same time is new each time it's offered because its purpose and content are carefully tailored to the needs of the partnering school district," Thompson said. "Consequently, all academies

look alike in basic spirit and structure, but each is different in content."

Red Corn understands the inherent challenges in the education system because he lived them.

"When you have adults across Indian Country who attended K-12 schools and predominantly white colleges, it's important to understand that assimilation processes set in motion long ago are still in motion in these schools," Red Corn said. "Imagine what it's like when Native American students are required to take U.S. history, U.S. government and English while not even having the choice of taking courses reflecting their own tribal history or language."

The origin of this ONELA partnership can be traced to a phone call. Red Corn, who had recently completed his master's degree in education at KU, called inquiring about the educational doctorate program in educational leadership and described his research agenda. On the other end of the line, Thompson was listening intently, and Red Corn was surprised by the academician's initial response.

"My enthusiasm was without containment," Thompson said. "As a college and department we are entrepreneurial, always seeking new ways to engage learning for leadership. Our faculty believes and knows at the deepest level that leadership makes a measurable difference in schoolchildren's lives, and we believe with equal passion that our leadership academy partnership model is the absolutely right way to engage the P-12 field — as we say, there are no good schools without good leaders."

Debbie Mercer, dean of the College of Education, is grateful for the growth opportunity.

"This academy is an opportunity for us to learn and grow together," Mercer said. "We appreciate the trust the Standing Bear administration has put in us, the unprecedented access, and the many ways this academy will deepen course content across the college."

