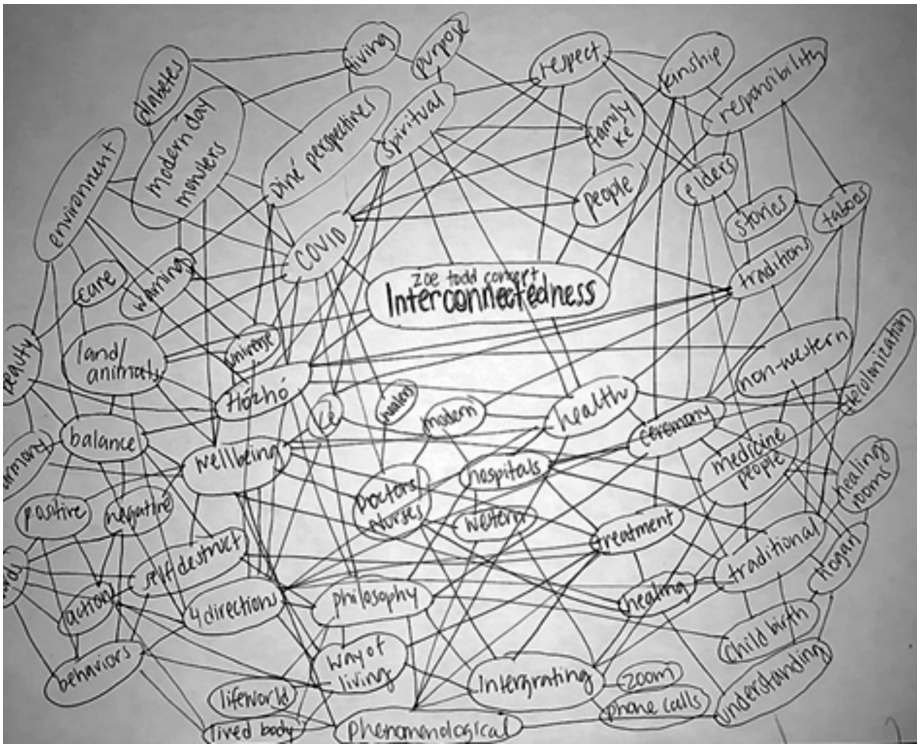
FINDING HÓZHÓ IN HEALTH CARE

By Shanell Yenchik

Yá'át'ééh, shí éí Shanell Yenchik *yinishyé. 'Adóone'é nishłínígíí 'éí Deeshchii'nii nishłí. Bilagáana 'éí bá shíshchíín. 'Áshiihí 'éí dashicheii nádáá. Bilagáana 'éí dashinálí. Tódinéeshzhee'déé' naashá.* Hello, my name is Shanell Yenchik. I am Navajo (*Diné*). I am of the Red Streak Clan, born for German. My maternal grandfather is of the Salt Clan, and my paternal grandfather is Czech. I am from a small town on the Navajo Nation called Kayenta.

For research in a gender and anthropology graduate course, I decided to look into how interconnectedness relates to people and health. This course required the development of a mind map and a literature review. As I was finding more and more information from my literature review, I added every important concept to my mind map on my topic. My mind map was interconnecting with lines tied to every idea. It came out looking sort of like a spiderweb. As soon as I saw the spidery art of how everything linked together, I knew I had to write a story.

In Navajo creation stories, we have a Holy Person called Spider Woman. She is known for telling stories, weaving, and as a protector of the *Diné* people. She told stories to give wisdom, to inform, and to help people. I decided to make a children's book about the interconnectedness of people and health. I wanted to express and share the knowledge that I learned in my research with everyone, including children. I wanted my storybook to be received in a way that is open and effortless to understand by the public. I also believe that storytelling is very important and carries a lot of cultural significance. Everything we learn as Navajo people is taught from oral stories, teachings, and instructions from our parents and grandparents. Stories are what connect us from generation to generation. Stories leave a different impact, one that will be remembered and looked back on as something fun, different, and where skills were learned.



Mindmap

My book is called, *Becoming the Doctor my People Need*. In it, a young Navajo girl named Bonnie tells the story of how she became the doctor her people needed. Bonnie starts off by telling us a bit about *Hózhó* (a Navajo philosophy involving harmony and balance) and why it is important. She explains what it was like as a kid going to ceremonies for healing and the positivity that followed. She then describes how illness and disease in Navajo culture are seen as monsters that can be combated by traditions, respect, and prayer. As she grows older, she starts to realize how her family and community feel about getting help from hospitals. Bonnie describes her people as unhappy and confused. She tells readers that this was when she decided to become a doctor.

Bonnie graduates from high school and is in college, where she feels something is missing from what she is learning. She goes on to graduate from college and becomes a doctor at a local hospital in her hometown. As she helps to take care of her community, she notices people are still not happy with their experience because of the disconnect between the patient and doctor, the lack of understanding of illness, and negativity. Bonnie then decides to implement traditions, culture, and the philosophy of *Hózhó* into the hospital's notion of care. She explains *Hózhó* as living in harmony and maintaining relational responsibilities with the land and animals.

Bonnie explains that this concept of *Hózhó* means doctors and nurses need to create respectful relationships with patients, understand what it means to be connected to everything in the universe, and acknowledge that more than our physical bodies are impacted by an illness or disease. She explains that the hospital she is working at decided to build a hogan (a traditional Navajo home, also used for ceremonial purposes) next door to hold ceremonies, to hire healers, and to provide the option for a sash belt birth (a

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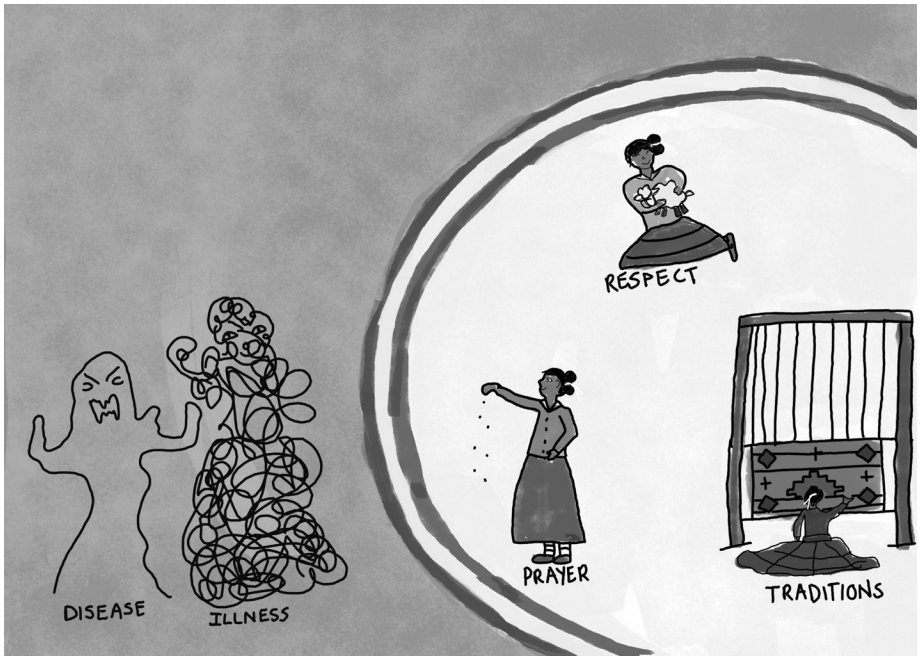
Cover Art of Book Illustrated by Ezekiel Ogden. This is an image of Bonnie looking up to her future self and Bonnie after she became a doctor looking back at her younger self.



Book Art Illustrated by Shanell Yenchik. This image represents disease and illness as "monsters" and protection (the rainbow serves as protection) from them can include prayer, respect, and practicing traditions.

traditional way to give birth involving a woven belt attached to the ceiling, allowing the mother to grasp them as she gives birth). Bonnie ends by stating that combining traditional healing and contemporary health care provides a welcoming, people-oriented, and culturally specific space for health care and well-being.

My main inspiration for my research and project came from Zoe Todd's (2017) article, "Fish, Kin, and Hope: Tending to Water Violations in *Amiskwaciwâskahikan* and Treaty Six Territory," in which Todd discusses the interconnectedness of people to the land and animals. Interconnectedness is viewing and having a relationship with land and animals as kin (Todd 2017). This concept of interconnectedness is very similar to the Navajo philosophy of *Hózhó*. *Hózhó* encompasses harmony, balance, and beauty in one's life. One living in *Hózhó* is connected to every living being, including plants, animals, and the land. Interconnectedness within *Hózhó* also involves family relations and kinship and the responsibilities and respect to one another (Kahn-John and Koithan 2015). *Hózhó* also means living in positivity, respect, taking care of yourself, and maintaining family relationships (Richardson and Crawford 2020). Everything in the universe is connected. Our well-being and health are also a part of how we go about our lives. Every part of our being—spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical—is embodied in *Hózhó*. This very concept of *Hózhó* reveals how important interconnectedness is to one's healing and well-being, which ties into health care.

My entire research on the interconnectedness of people and health is presented throughout my storybook. Although I could not fit everything I learned into the story, I made sure the main points were tied in. After looking into interconnectedness and *Hózhó*, I started to find information about the outcomes, importance, and examples of combining contemporary health care and traditional Navajo healing. Many of my sources discussed how Western health care only focuses on the illness and not the person as a whole, which in turn leaves many Navajo patients unsatisfied because they do not fully understand their illness (Hardeen 1994; Schneider and DeHaven 2003; Rosenthal, Menking, and Begay 2020). The focus on illness itself is also different for biomedical care and traditional Navajo healing. Navajo healers focus on rebalancing the person as a whole and point to their daily lives to understand why they have this illness.

Also, the importance of land, culture, language, family relationships, responsibilities, and connectedness to the universe is vital in understanding well-being for most Navajo and Indigenous peoples (Bird 2002; Krisst 2020; Schneider and DeHaven 2003). Understanding well-being in this way explains the reasons why interconnectedness is related to people and health. Many authors describe combining traditional and modern healing in hospitals and the successfulness of it. Integrating traditional sash belt births is one way, but also hiring traditional healers and building a hogan as a space for ceremonies are two other ways this can be fulfilled (Begay 2021; Hardeen 1994; Rhoades 2009). Rhoades (2009)

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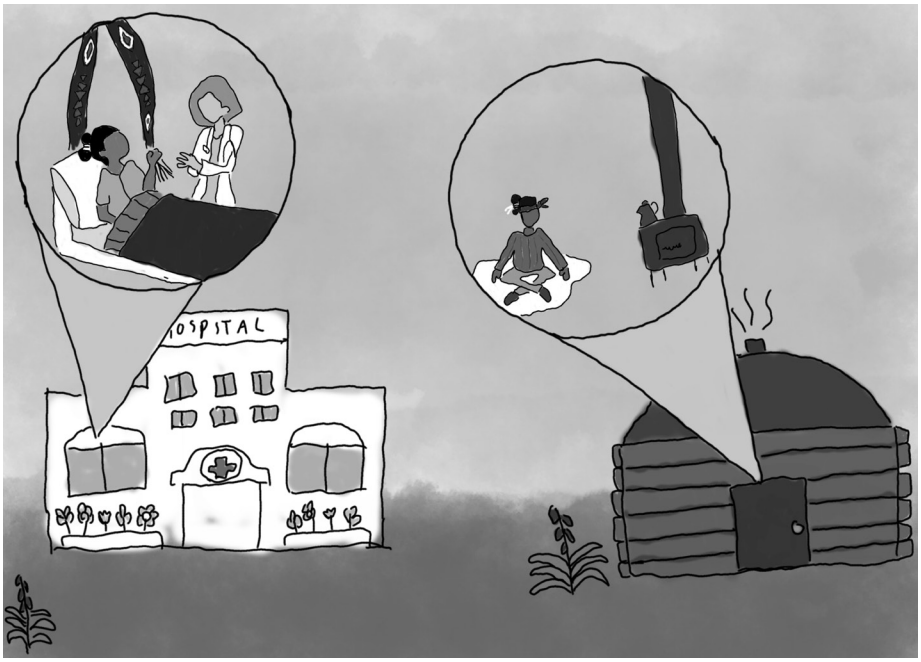

Book Art Illustrated by Shanell Yenchik. This image shows the implementation of Navajo traditional healing by sash belt births in hospitals and having hogans nearby for ceremonies.

also discussed constructing hospitals and clinics with cultural aspects intertwined in the physical layout to bring a sense of belonging and respect.

I want this to be a story that can be told to future generations, so that like in Bonnie's story, Indigenous health care systems can become a welcoming and understanding space for non-Eurocentric ways of thinking about well-being and healing.

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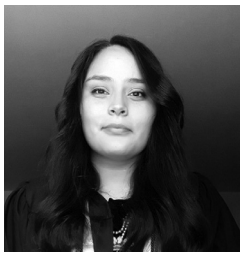
Shanell Yenchik *(sny6@nau.edu) is from a small town on the Navajo Nation called Kayenta, AZ. She is a first-year master's student pursuing her M.A. in Anthropology with a sociocultural emphasis. She received her B.A. in Anthropology and B.S. in Sociology from NAU. For her research, she is interested in Indigenous anthropology and traditional cultural knowledge relating to wellbeing and health. Shanell hopes to one day work with the Navajo Nation government to enrich the lives of her community by aiding with policy making, community programs, and culture/language revitalization.* ■



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