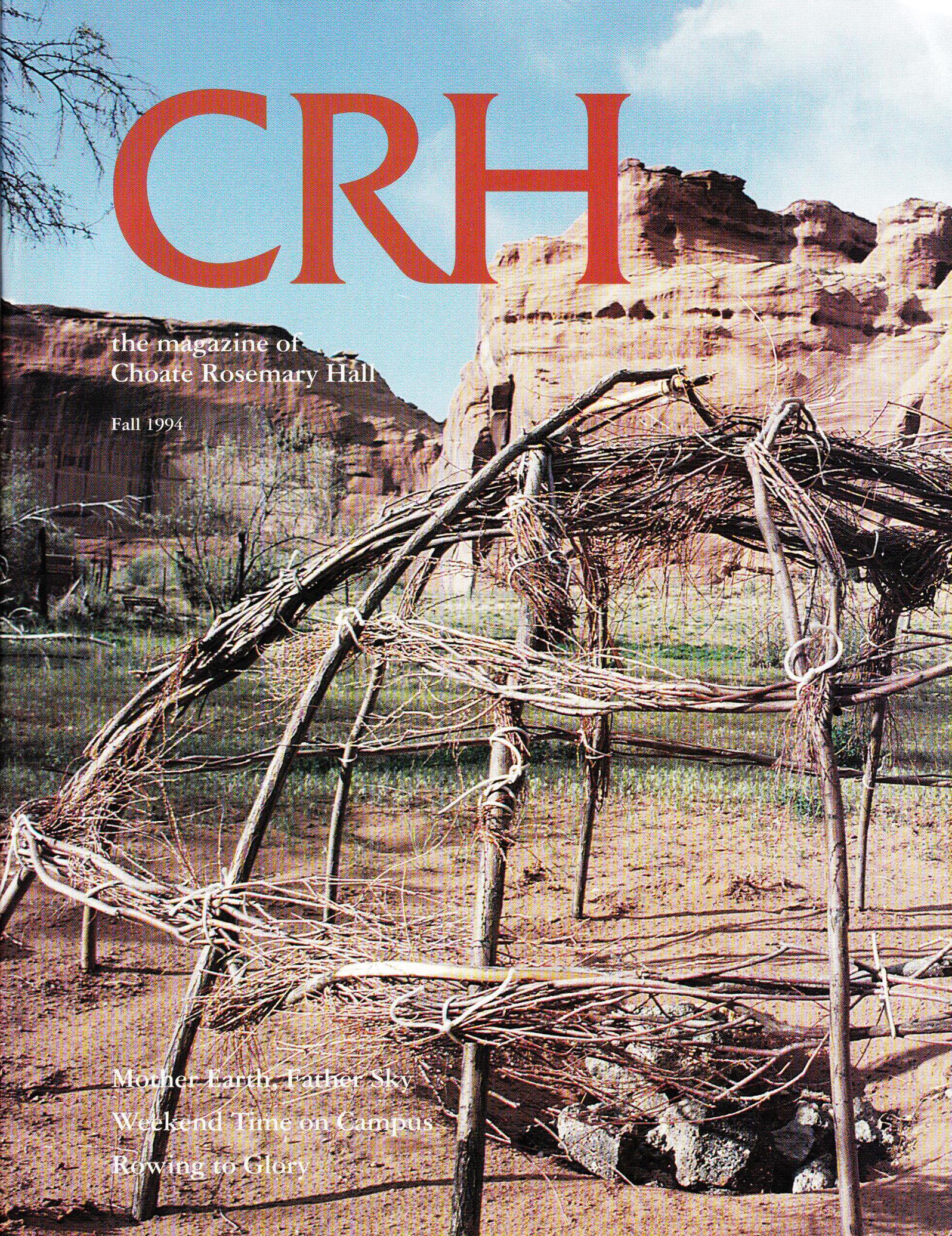


# CRH



the magazine of  
Choate Rosemary Hall

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Mother Earth, Father Sky  
Weekend Time on Campus  
Rowing to Glory

# MOTHER EARTH FATHER SKY

The First Navajo Exchange

by Marne Hodgkin

**W**e got out of the van the first day of school and shuffled into the pink and turquoise high school—a bunch of bleary-eyed Anglos with white sneakers and that lost look of bewilderment and expectation. We waited for a long, staring moment then found our guide and went up to the cafeteria for many more long, staring moments. I felt like the typical bug caught in the immovable glare of the microscope light: pinned down by shyness, fear, and uncertainty). —Jennifer Smith '94

**N**o promised blue skies, but rather a heavy blanket of snow greeted the nine students when they landed in Window Rock, Arizona. Project leader John Faulkner welcomed the inclement weather as a sign of how the group's expectations and preconceptions would be tested. From the windows of their house, in one direction the students had a spectacular view of the mountains; in another was a cemetery and a burned-out building, sites of great mystical imagery and taboo for the Navajo. The students were faced immediately with what would be the constant juxtaposition of the harsh social conditions with the overwhelming power and beauty of the land itself. Graffiti left by gang members called Creepers and Dreamers served to remind the exchange students that they weren't living on a campus, that real-world problems surrounded them at Window Rock. Within sight of where the students lived was a teepee associated with the Native American Church (NAC), whose ceremonies include the use of peyote as a means of enlightenment. Needless to say, Faulkner had to be sure the Choate students, in the spirit of total immersion, did not partake of this sacramental offering. They couldn't wander at will at night; they couldn't assume they would be universally liked or welcome. They were, probably for the first time, a distinct minority. Such were the cultural dislocations experienced by the Choate group during the first-ever exchange between Window Rock High School and Choate Rosemary Hall.

The school is always looking for ways to enrich the lives of its students and expand their world view. In this spirit, last spring marked the beginning of an entirely new venture—sending selected students to live and study in the Navajo Nation with an equal number of Navajo students coming to live for four weeks at Choate. Made possible by a generous gift from the James P. MacDonald Foundation, the program is the brain-child of fine arts teacher Faulkner, who used his sabbatical term in 1993 to teach on nine reservations around the country. Such was his admiration for the Navajo Nation and its land that he proposed that Choate bridge the two worlds—the Southwest and the Northeast—with a



*First morning snow, looking west*

student exchange. On April 8, nine Choate students departed Wallingford for Window Rock; five days later nine Navajo students arrived at Choate.

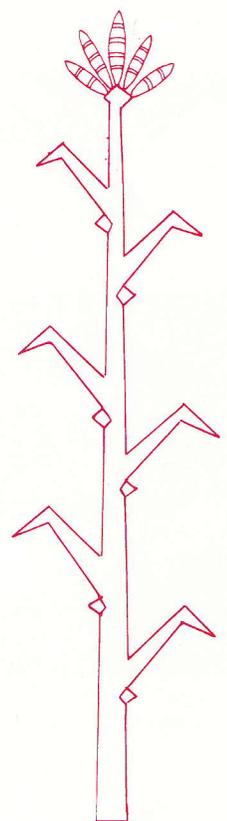
### Contrasting cultures

**F**rom the start, the exchange was a study in contrasts, which between the world of Choate Rosemary Hall and the Navajo Nation are about as extreme as you get. On-campus coordinators John Cobb and Megan Shea (both English teachers) and Faulkner firmly believe it is these extremes that create a more powerful learning experience; experiential education through cultural exchange is more valuable than the more esoteric educational practices of reading, writing, and committing facts and theories to memory. The success of our term abroad programs to Europe reflects this understanding. When kids have to live it, they learn it. As novelist Zora Neale Hurston says in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, "You have to go there to know there."

*I feel like I'm in a different country, one I've seen on some PBS special. Trailers and old pick-ups litter the landscape, adding a quality of desperate reality to the illusion. The trailers are silent and still. It is as if the cold has frozen all signs of life, except for the dogs. I can hear them barking from somewhere in the vacuous space that envelops me. The land and the sky meet; there is nothing to separate them, and they both stretch out into the distance. I realize that I have no concept of distance out here. The mesa that appears to be a short distance away could actually be miles away. I stare at it, vowing that I will someday find out.—Lauren Rubsam '94*

### In class and on foot

**A** number of components gave this exchange shape and purpose, offering maximum exposure to a cross-cultural experience. What makes the exchange unique is that a number of Choate teachers have experience teaching Native Americans. Cobb and Shea, for example, taught at the Native American Prep School in Las Cruces, New Mexico. This gives them a leg up in understanding "the Navajo Way," which, simply put, is the sense of the connectedness of all relationships, linking family, spirituality, and mythology. The





Megan Shea in English class

sense of spirituality transcending place is expressed in this piece by Marietta Allison:

### **My Grandma**

*Before the Sun leaves on his journey from his home all day,  
my grandma is already about from her bed to start the day.  
When Mother Earth is silent and her grounds, we walk upon, are cold,  
my grandma has started a fire to warm up the morning.  
She would then step out into the mist of morning to pray.  
She would pray to the God, "Deyin," to give protection over her*

*children and their children.*

*To watch over them when they leave to their duties in everyday life.*

*And to pray, to bring them back to their homes safely when the Sun sets.*

*My grandma does her everyday chores around her house. Sometimes she would have only a spare minute to look out in the pale colored pasture where her sheep graze.*

*Vividly, my grandma would tell me how she misses her mother, my great-grandmother.*

*My grandma said she had someone to comfort her like she comforts me.*

*My grandma learned the traditional ways of her mother. The love for children and respect for what the Gods have given us are the aspects she carries within her.*

*To be the grandma she is now.*

*When the night has fallen upon the land,*

*my grandma would take a walk where the stars glittered above.*

*She would thank "Deyin" for answering her prayers.*

*For her children returned safely,  
for the Sun who made his long journey.*

*Only to return back to his home.*

The classroom curriculum focused on Navajo history and culture, Native American literature, and Native American language. Community service, which will be expanded during next spring's exchange, involved our students at a local elementary school, tutoring young Navajos in math and reading skills. Rigorous outdoor activities (lots

of hiking) took the students to remote areas; a Wednesday night lecture series provided added stimulation from elders in the community. Other adventures included a rafting trip on the Delores River in Colorado (at Four Corners), using equipment of the Nataanii Trails, a wilderness leadership program for Navajo youths; a Pow-wow in Albuquerque; and a trek into Grand Canyon.

In addition to being surrounded by spectacular and humbling landscapes, the kids had to take far greater than usual responsibility for the small essentials of living. They had to cook, clean, and share a co-ed living space with a motley crew, which was sometimes a struggle. They were immersed in an exciting co-curriculum involving experiences away from school; Faulkner arranged intensive explorations of culture through people and place. The group met tribal leaders and traditional Navajo people on their sojourns. These explorations resulted in a greater appreciation of culture, ours and the Navajos', and created a feast for the senses.

### **Becoming acquainted**

Window Rock is a town at 7,000 feet, so snows come and go with some regularity. The entire two-and-one-half-million-acre reservation, about the size of New Hampshire, Vermont, Connecticut, and Rhode Island together, is the home of about 250,000 Navajo. So few people, so much land.

Attending Window Rock High School, the group had to divest itself of some of its conventional notions of high school; Choate and Window Rock are essentially polar opposites. Consider that Window Rock High School struggles with truancy, that discipline is a larger part of every teacher's job, and that comparatively



Negotiating the Yei Trail

few students aspire to college. Much of teachers' energy is directed to motivating students. Having to use hall passes and other impediments to freedom surprised and dismayed our kids. They felt conspicuously in the minority; the Navajos approached them very cautiously. In contrast to Choate's residential community, virtually all teachers live in trailers near school; to live in the

teacherage (the compound where teachers live) is a valued perk of the job because housing of any kind is scarce. Navajos live on their ancestral homeland, unlike other Native Americans whose location is imposed on them by the reservation system. Housing options are limited because all land, considered sacred, is shared, not owned. The Choate group was fortunate to be comfortably housed at the Episcopal Mission. Navajos are considered wealthy in natural resources, which might appear contradicted by living conditions on the reservation.

Through courses taught at Choate in Native American literature and culture, the first exchange group was prepared intellectually for their trip to the Southwest. But the experiential component once in Window Rock had a far greater impact on the students than any amount of advance reading. Some preconceptions were turned upside-down as the students began to explore their new environment.

Navajo culture and society are matriarchal and center around grazing rights, language, and the clan system of

extended family. Oral tradition is carried by elders of both genders like the strikingly calm and confident Lettie Nave, the cultural teacher for the elementary school in Fort Defiance. She invited the kids to her land in Canyon De Chelly, which they reached by way of the ancient, serpentine Yei Trail. Once there, Lettie cooked up a batch of traditional mutton stew and demonstrated various uses for yucca. Canyon De Chelly is the mythological center of the Navajo Nation. "It's a natural temple," says John Faulkner. The Anasazi ruins cannot be touched because of respect for one's ancestors; our students showed the proper reverence. A highlight of the trip to Lettie Nave's land was seeing the petroglyphs—prehistoric drawings on the cliff sides. Upcanyon, the site where government Indian agent Kit Carson slaughtered thousands of Native Americans had a very sobering effect on the visitors while re-writing some lessons in American history.



Lauren Rubsam between classes with her student.

### *The Land and i*

*i lay here in a ocean  
of submerged Red Cliff Walls  
with reefs of Sage suffocating  
the sandy sea floor.  
i slowly swim along the bottom  
staring at the breathless Landscape*

*and gaping  
at the rippling blue and  
white patterns  
in the surface far above.  
i am taken in and absorbed  
by the Dirt and the Sun  
as the fiery and blistering  
Rays  
of bright Heat leave their  
marks on my face.  
i quickly come to respect  
The Elements  
whose powers are larger  
than my imagination,  
and as the Wind comes to  
test  
my agility on the sharp  
and massive Rocks  
i kneel  
to submit myself.—Ashlee  
Diehl '94*

The group also visited Beulah Allen, MD, a former Navajo princess. Both a medical doctor and a traditional storyteller, she understands healing both in her world and ours and works at a remote medical clinic. Dr.

Allen invited the group

to her hogan (the typical six-sided Navajo dwelling of earth and timbers) and talked for more than three hours about the Creation Myth and answered student questions about "shape shifters"—the devil incarnate in canine form. She also talked to the kids about the constellations and attendant stories. From the start the group took to star-gazing in a canyon right outside of town and by the end of their stay gazed with vastly greater knowledge and appreciation.



John Cobb in class with Shelton Laughing, Tonya Burke, Andrea Gorman, and Thelma Woodie, all from Window Rock.

## Meanwhile, back in Wallingford

 n June 1, 1994, the Education Section of *The New York Times* carried the story of the exchange from the perspective of the Navajos in Wallingford (the article also ran on the front page of the *International Herald Tribune* in June). *Times* writer Michael Winerip conducted a number of interviews. The Navajo students, experiencing their own kind of dislocation, had some interesting responses:

- Shelton Laughing said that while at Choate he “missed seeing the prairie and the entire sky.” He was unable to see the spot where land meets the sky, the place where life thrives according to Navajo lore.

*The land is our mother and we care for her like no other. She is massive and beautiful. She stretches from the horizon into the great blue sky. She loves us and we love her because she gives us shelter, protection, food, and clothing. She provides us with love, compassion, and understanding. She does not speak but we know she is there for she'll live forever in the wind, rain, and in our open hearts. We are her children. We will obey her every word and hope that she will be proud of us and continue her love for the Navajo people. She is Mother Earth and we are her children.—Timothy Huskett*

- The Navajo students were taken by how green and hilly the campus was, although the trees and rolling hills blocked out the early morning sun. They were also struck by how safe life was on campus.

*The faculty here also are good in that they leave their classrooms open for their students. When the school is in session, every door is unlocked and students can go anywhere to do their work. At Window Rock the teachers try to lock their doors to their classrooms as much as they can. Even if they*

*are just going to run down to the office and get something, they lock their door and students have to wait outside until the the teacher comes back. Some places are off limits for the students. If the students want to go to these places, they will have to be accompanied by one of the faculty members.—Shelton Laughing*



*LeAndrea Thomas, Thelma Woodie, and Marietta Allison*

- Wealth and social class were the real differences between the Choate and Navajo students—not ability—and this was borne out in many areas from calculus class to the running track. Donovan Gee said, “Even though they (Choate students) have more money, I could achieve the same. See, I might be a little more determined.”

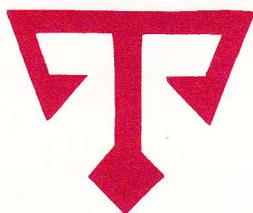
- When asked which school they would pick if they were to start high school again, all nine of the Window Rock exchange students had the same pick—Choate. Said one, “The reasons are obvious.”

The Choate *News* also carried an article describing

the Navajo students’ reactions to their new surroundings. LeAndrea Thomas said the Choate campus reminded her of what college might look like. She and her friends from Window Rock reported that teachers here were “helpful and friendly.” Having teachers living among the students was “a real bonus.” Although comfortable and warmly welcomed in their dorms, the two girls found some cultural differences in the housing. “Navajos have a tradition of building their houses so that doors always face the East,” they explained. “It’s odd that your doors face in any direction.”

As for their preconceptions of the Choate students staying in Window Rock, LeAndrea commented that she thought they would be bored there, “since they are used to being near big cities. Our hometown is quite removed from the city.” As for the kids around her at Choate she remarked, “When one thinks of Choate, one thinks of rich and preppy, but not everyone here fits into that mold.”

*The people here are very welcoming when they pass you on the street. The people here are helpful and friendly when they socialize with you. There are different people that are international or local citizens of the country. Some of the people here are curious of you by their irritating stares,*



*Tonya Burke in Fine Arts class in the Paul Mellon Arts Center.*

*especially in public places. The people here talk more than the people at Window Rock. They talk about anything.—Tonya Burke*

The Window Rock students experienced complete immersion in the routine of Choate Rosemary Hall. They all lived in dorms—most with roommates—ate in the dining halls, attended classes, and took part in sports and arts programs. They reportedly found the pace much faster and somewhat tiring. But all felt welcome and suggested a longer stay for the next group. They spent the first two periods every day with John Cobb, who taught Native American Literature, and read poetry, legends, stories, and two novels. Journals were required, and many of their pieces were collected for a book.

In addition to academic and extracurricular activities on campus, the visitors last spring had a number of outings arranged by Megan Shea. These were designed to increase their exposure to New England and struck a balance between tourism and cultural excursions—a day in New York City, hosted by John '66 and Clara Dale, parents of Ed Dale '94, along with former Choate art teacher Tim Trelease; the Mashantucket Pequot Reservation; a trip to Boston; the Basketball Hall of Fame; Block Island, for most the first visit to the sea; Spirit of Unity Weekend at Yale, hosted by Shandiin Garcia '92, our second Native American graduate; shopping malls, a particularly popular activity; and a Navajo Feast.

At an ice-cream gathering of the Navajo students and their new Choate friends, held the night before returning to Window Rock, adviser Megan Shea observed that “it was very apparent these kids had touched each other’s lives in truly significant ways. Addresses were exchanged, many photos taken, and tears were shed.” At the end it was very hard to say goodbye—the Navajo kids didn’t want to miss Choate’s graduation, but their own prom pulled them back home.

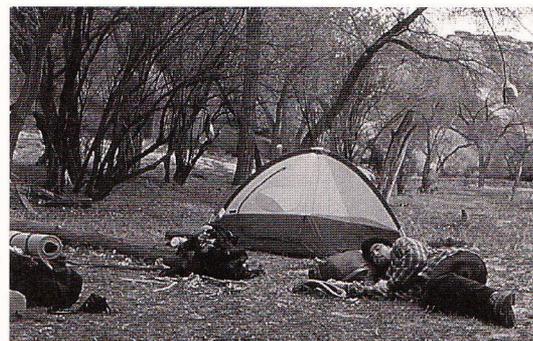


*Thelma Woodie, Andrea Gorman, Donovan Gee, and Shelton Laughing in Patricia Temple’s calculus class.*

## Looking Ahead—the second exchange

**O**n a late September evening this fall, Navajo exchange coordinator John Faulkner met with more than 20 students interested in applying for the Spring '95 exchange. Faulkner took pains to emphasize that such an experience would not be a lark, that there would be major adjustments required by the new environment, and that academic rigor would be maintained. Choate students must complete all graduation requirements and must be “in good standing.” Faulkner also emphasized the uniqueness of the program. It’s a true exchange and not a one-way experience as in some schools. He then showed slides to whet the kids’ appetites for the adventures that might await them.

As for the experience of attending Window Rock High School, Faulkner said that although the school is a beautiful modern facility, our students would feel the pressures of being in a minority and of being “new students” in their senior year. It was certain to be socially challenging. But along with the risk-taking would be great growth and discovery, found in the profound experience of the sweat lodge, the sight of things ancient and sacred at the same time, and in



*Elijah Emerson after the four-day bike into the Grand Canyon.*

opportunities to be alone and meditate on one’s place in the universe.

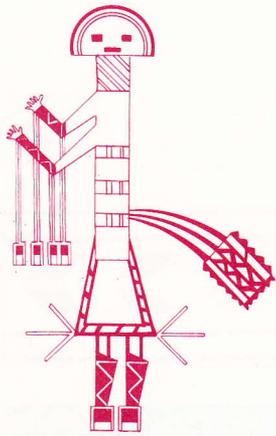
Naturally there were some glitches to work out for future exchanges. The coordinators admit to “flying by the seat of our pants” the first time around and communication was erratic at times. They see a need for more

adult support, both in Wallingford and Window Rock. In a sign of confidence and support, the Board of Education in Window Rock agreed to fund a teacher for the exchange at Choate next year.



*LeAndrea Thomas competed in track for the Choate team.*





Meanwhile, Faulkner, on site at Window Rock, will also get help managing the students and their activities. Last spring he was sole adviser for nine young people, logging 4,000 miles on the van in five weeks and arranging meals, laundry trips, and medical care. Next spring Faulkner will be assisted in all these tasks by a person from Window Rock.

Academic components (to be seen as an "intellectual odyssey") actually will be cranked up a notch or two next spring: to increase rigor, an oral presentation based on individual experience as well as a written "capstone" project will be required. Before they leave for Window Rock our students will again read Navajo literature including poetry, political history, and geography. While on the reservation they will be encouraged to keep journals as a means to support their oral presentations and will continue their study of Native American literature that they began in Wallingford.

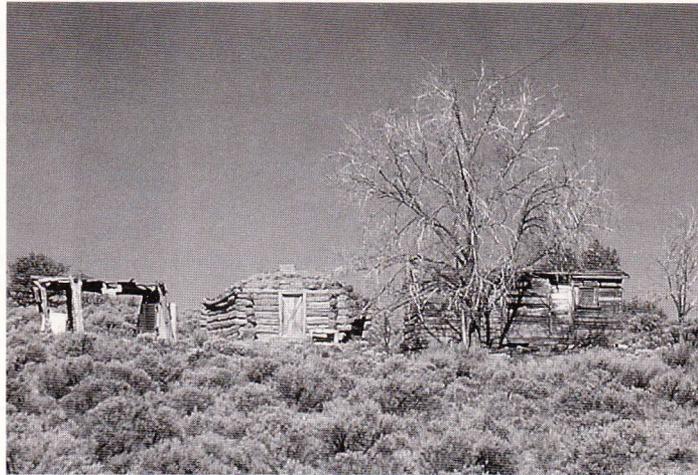
From a pool of 24 interested and motivated applicants, the second group of nine was selected this fall. And in an unprecedented development, Walter Handelman, director of the James P. MacDonald Foundation, which usually provides only seed money for cutting-edge projects, agreed to fund the exchange in its second year. Such success is hard to come by and is a tribute not only to the generosity of the donor but also to the passionate advocacy of exchange "founding father" John Faulkner.



Program leader John Faulkner.

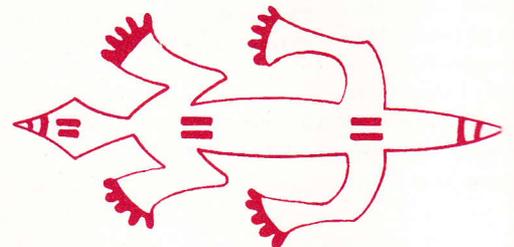
## The Navajo Way

In an October presentation to a NAIS (National Association of Independent Schools) gathering in Providence, John Faulkner and John Cobb emphasized to schools interested in starting up an exchange that they must be mindful of the complexities and labor involved in establishing a relationship of trust and mutual understanding. "You don't set this up over the phone," says Faulkner. "Nothing can be taken for granted, because everything is organized differently and even the sense of time is different." The appropriate attitude in arranging for an exchange is that there is much to be learned from this ancient culture.



Traditional sod-roofed bogan in Canyon Benito, Fort Defiance, Arizona

Such exchanges are not risk free, and the enormity of the land and sky can engender feelings of loneliness and isolation. But the students also can roam on "a campus the size of New England." Financial Aid Director Tom Southworth, who last May visited Window Rock for the final two weeks of the exchange, was personally "blown away" and found the scale of the place humbling and emotional. "Though my time on the reservation was short . . . I sensed the overwhelming intellectual, emotional, and physical experience of our students in this place," Southworth said. "I am a different person as a result of my time on the Reservation. I am convinced that the same must be true for our students. This program is one of the best opportunities the school has and it should be nurtured in every way possible. In five short weeks, our students learned lessons about Native Americans and lessons about themselves that will live with them forever." ■



# Projects

One of the requirements for the Choate students during the exchange was to undertake a project of their own design and choosing. Most projects reflected the impact of the land on the visitors, some of whom were moved to poetry and other forms of artistic expression, others to historical research.

**Jenny Smith** composed original poetry about earth, wind, fire, and water. Inspired by her surroundings Jenny said, "The Navajo are very closely connected to the earth. I had hoped to find spirituality, and found it in the land."

**Rick Coduri** composed poetry, regarding animals and animal legends.

**Lauren Rubsam** explored the subject of death in the Navajo Nation, including various taboos related to death, dying, and burial.

**Elijah Emerson** researched the history of the American Indian Movement (AIM), roughly

equivalent to the Black Power movement in terms of militancy.

**Sarah Jordan** painted canyon cliffs as seen from the back porch of the mission home where the students stayed.

**Melanie Reid's** project concerned Navajo stories and legends, in particular the legend concerning the omnipresent coyote.

**Ashlee Diehl** explored symbolism in Native American jewelry and displayed a number of beautiful items brought back from the Southwest.

**Cynthia Campos** studied the presence of the Catholic Church on Navajo reservations and its devastating effect on Native American life and culture.

**Tom Collins** took issue with the concept of assimilation. The imposition of white culture on Native Americans, by military or missionary means, had far-reaching, negative consequences.



*The Choate exchange group on the morning of their departure, from left: Cynthia Campos, Sarah Jordan, Lauren Rubsam, Jennifer Smith, Melanie Reid, Tom Collins, Ashlee Diehl, Elijah Emerson, Rick Coduri.*



John Paulkner

*Anasazi cliff markings, Canyon de Chelly, Arizona*

