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University of Montana–Missoula. Office of University Relations, "American Indian overcomes obstacles, prepares to graduate" (2000). *University of Montana News Releases, 1928, 1956-present*. 16622. <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/newsreleases/16622>

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UNIVERSITY RELATIONS • MISSOULA, MT 59812 • 406-243-2522 • FAX: 406-243-4520

NEWS RELEASE

This release is available electronically on INN (News Net.)

May 3, 2000

Contact: Linda Osler, director, Health Careers Opportunity Program, (406) 243-4095.

AMERICAN INDIAN OVERCOMES OBSTACLES, PREPARES TO GRADUATE

MISSOULA-

**By Patia Stephens
University Relations**

Persistence is paying off for Joe Charlo. Nearly nine years after he began college, he's about to graduate from The University of Montana.

Charlo, who first attended UM in fall 1991, will receive a doctor of pharmacy degree on May 13. With his hard-earned diploma, he hopes to land work at a Montana pharmacy, perhaps on the Flathead Indian Reservation. Charlo and three other graduating classmates will double the ranks of American Indian pharmacists practicing in Montana.

A great-great-grandson of the famous Salish Chief Charlo, the soft-spoken future pharmacist chose his career because he wants to help improve the health of Indian people. Charlo believes that by being able to relate to his patients' cultural identities, he can help build a pharmacist-patient relationship based on trust.

"When I was little, I remember my grandparents talking about western medicine and something to the effect that they'd trust a Native American more," Charlo said. "One of the biggest reasons I wanted to become a pharmacist was the trust issue.

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“Plus, I was always interested in biology and how things work,” he added. “I just think my mind is geared toward the sciences.”

That inclination served Charlo well as he progressed through the challenging math- and science-oriented pharmacy curriculum, which he completed last year, and now as he fulfills his clinical requirements.

But he had many obstacles to overcome on his road to his degree. Although Charlo was salutatorian of Arlee High School’s class of 1990, at UM he found himself struggling academically.

“I didn’t do so well when I first got to the University,” he said. “I was put on academic probation my very first year.”

Culture shock was part of the problem. Charlo and one other classmate were the only graduating seniors in a class of 26 to go on to college, and making the transition from a small reservation school to an urban University with thousands of students was tough.

“Classes in Urey (Lecture Hall) were bigger than my whole high school,” he said. “It was a big adjustment when I came here. I didn’t know anybody at all, and I didn’t know what to expect.

“I kind of felt like I didn’t fit in or belong,” he added. “It’s like a different world, actually.”

Charlo was fortunate to have a good adviser who suggested he take a class on learning strategies, which helped him improve his study habits. He also eventually learned about free tutoring and other resources available on campus, and he met other students.

Another contributing factor to Charlo's success is a unique UM program designed to increase the number of American Indian pharmacists and physical therapists working in Montana. The Health Careers Opportunity Program, based at the School of Pharmacy and Allied Health Sciences, combines rigorous academics, culturally relevant activities and a holistic approach to prepare minority students for the rigorous academic challenges that lie ahead of them.

Charlo participated in two six-week summer HCOP sessions during 1995 and 1996.

"It was like a college environment, where you went to class and got assignments and were expected to get them done," Charlo said. "It was a lot of hard work. At the time I don't think I liked it very much, but now I'm kind of glad I went through it."

HCOP's approach to intensive study, academic orientation and recreational activities teaches participants to succeed in the classroom and on the job. Participants study tough subjects like chemistry, mathematics and physics within the context of weekly themes, such as mental health, youth tobacco use, and diabetes and nutrition.

"I think HCOP helped me prepare by strengthening my weaknesses, like organic chemistry," he said. "Also, I got to know a couple of the pharmacy professors before I was even in the program, and the numbers were small so the professor had time to spend with you individually."

The program's curriculum is centered on Montana Indians, although students from all recognized minorities are encouraged to apply. Where possible, class material is explored from a culturally relevant standpoint; for example, by using the traditional hoop and pole game to

teach physics. Other activities include sweat lodge ceremonies and a horseback ethnobotany field trip. Students also perform community service projects, research observation and job shadowing. And they learn strategies for coping with the demands of higher education, like navigating financial aid, dealing with prejudice in the classroom and facing conflicting obligations.

“I wish I’d had HCOP sooner,” he said. “We had a class that showed us how to budget our time -- how to structure your day to get things done.”

For Charlo, that class was invaluable. He and his wife Kim have three children -- Darian, 5; Laine, 3; and Jharen, 9 months -- and they live in Arlee, which means a daily commute of 52 miles for Joe. On a good day, that’s 35 minutes each way; however, winter’s icy roads can slow things considerably.

Charlo’s commute now brings him to the pharmacy at Community Medical Center, where he is completing a series of clinical rotations. His other clerkships have included a tribal health center, a Veterans Affairs facility, a community pharmacy, a mental health center and the state crime lab. The clerkships are 40 hours a week of unpaid work, although they provide valuable learning opportunities.

“We have to have 1,500 hours of clinical experience to satisfy our requirements for the board, and this is how we get it,” he said.

Charlo said HCOP’s emphasis on role-modeling -- wherever possible, instructors and guest speakers include a number of Indians -- provided vital inspiration and encouragement.

“Seeing other Indian pharmacists in that position helped give me the confidence to keep

HCOPjc.rl--5

going instead of quitting," he said. "It showed that even though there are few Indian pharmacists, there are some."

Charlo modestly hopes to serve as a positive example for others. "My family has told me that it's good to show myself as a role model," he said.

His wife and parents get a lot of the credit for encouraging and supporting him in his academic and career goals. And come May 13, the family will see their hard work pay off, when Joe becomes the first among them to graduate from a college or university.

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Editor's note: A black-and-white portrait of Joe Charlo is available upon request. Please call Rita Munzenrider at (406) 243-4824 or e-mail munzen@selway.umt.edu.

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