

QUAPAW NATION SPOTLIGHT:

KRISTA PIERCE



How did you get into your field?

Education was somewhat of a “full circle” experience for me. When I was in grade school and middle school, I wanted to be a lawyer. In high school, I found I was good at writing and decided I wanted to become a journalist. At the college level, I changed my major three times as a freshman, going from journalism to mass communications to business.

While I was trying to decide on a career plan, I always seemed to be working with children in some capacity. While in college, I taught Sunday School for three- and four-year olds and took a mission trip in Kansas where we held Vacation Bible School for kids of all ages. It was fun, but I didn’t consider it a career option at that point in my life.

I quit college, got married, and moved to Colorado, where I lived in Aurora and Denver (on Lowry Air Force Base). This is where I got my start as a nanny. A few years later, I moved to Anderson, Alaska and nannied there for an Air Force couple for about a year. Then, it was back to Colorado where I nannied for my last military family in Monument. I also volunteered at the area Montessori school while I was a nanny there.

Once I moved back home (Riverton, Kansas), I remarried and had my boys, Sam and Kade. Eventually, I became a single parent. I was a paraprofessional for Interlocal #637 and served as a Site Coordinator for the 21st Century Learning Program in a local school district for a while. I also began substitute teaching for local districts and working as a teacher at my sons’ daycare in the afternoons. It finally hit me at this point how much I loved being with kids and teaching them. This was when I was ready to get serious about my education and return to college. I enrolled at Pitt State in 2002 and graduated in 2006 with my Bachelor of Science in English education and a minor in Secondary Special Education. I taught at Webb City for a year then resigned to be able to help my son who was diagnosed with atypical Autism, Pervasive Developmental Disorder, Not Otherwise Specified (PDD, NOS) while I was going to school.

For a while, I substituted at local districts, then did a long-term substitution at Quapaw Schools in the fall of 2008. Afterwards, I returned to school at Pitt State for a while before getting on at Downstream Learning Center as an evening shift supervisor in 2011. I was at DLC when the Higher Education Director position came open in 2013. I applied and was hired for the position.

What do you like about working in your role?

My inspiration for what I do comes from my desire to honor the memory of my daughter, Khloe Lyn Umphenour-Ellis (Peoria, Eastern Shawnee, and Osage). Everything I do for our students is what I would want someone to have done for Khloe.

I love helping students achieve their goals academically, career-wise, and in life. There are so many avenues that are available now. The mantra for the Higher Education department is that when you walk through our door, you have a clean slate. No matter your past, we are here to help you achieve the positive things that can be part of your future. There is also no such thing as being “too old” to start or continue your career or education. Author George Eliot said, “It’s never too late to be what

you might have been.”

Working with so many students that are on different paths and parts of their journeys is very humbling. Traditional college students, non-traditional students, concurrent/dual credit students, adult learners, vocational and technical students—I love them all and their uniqueness.

One of the blessings of my role is being able to still teach in some capacity now and then. We hold a variety of informational workshops and sessions. They include financial aid information/FAFSA, student loans, and college basics; budgeting and beyond; and researching and finding scholarships. Being able to provide our students, families, Tribal Members, and the community at-large valuable information and some important skills is always a positive.

How long have you worked for the Quapaw Nation?

I started in June of 2013, so I have worked for the Nation 11 and-a-half years.

What do you like about working for the Quapaw Nation?

I’m very lucky to have such a great boss in Steva Stand. She inspires me to be a better person and a better employee. I love that I get to work with a great group of people, and truly enjoy the projects we collaborate on together. I honestly feel like this is where I was meant to be and I feel lucky that I fell into this career.

What are you passionate about outside of your job?

Girl Scouts! I was a Brownie and a Girl Scout when I was young. Now, I volunteer with my niece Lilly’s Girl Scout troop. I help at meetings whenever I can and serve as the treasurer for our Service Unit. My favorite time of the year is when we open our Girl Scouts Fair Kitchen during the county fair in Columbus, Kansas. I always schedule the week off to help at the Fair Kitchen.

I am also passionate about writing. I have just recently started writing again and hope to publish a novel within the next few years. I have started on a comedy-romance novel and a murder mystery. We’ll see which comes to fruition first. Ultimately, I would love to pen a true crime novel. I’m a huge true crime fan because it’s a chance to study the psyches of those individuals who commit heinous crimes.

Cooking is the other thing I am passionate about. I don’t cook as much as I used to, but when I do, it is always an expression of my love and care. I love to cook comfort food, Italian fare, Mexican food, and Chinese (I make pretty good cashew chicken from scratch).

Tell us about yourself!

My boys, Sam and Kade, and I, have been our own little team against the world for over 23 years now. We share the same sense of humor and enjoy our conversations. Of course, our fur babies, Ariel (Pittie mix), and our three cats Rosie, Caroline, and Harry (our failed foster) are part of our family as well and very spoiled. My family (mom, dad, sisters, brother-n-law, niece, and nephews) all live close by. We enjoy holidays and get togethers whenever we can.

My boyfriend, Trey, is a very important part of my life. He helps to balance my extremes, is amazingly patient with my Type A personality, and respects me. He makes me laugh and helps me to enjoy the lighter side of life (even when I am hangry). I can’t imagine life without him.

I’ve always been proud to be a geek, although at my age, I tell everyone I have made it to Geek Goddess level.