

Mother and Son Navajo Students Earn Master's Degrees From ITLS

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Kristy Bloxham, professor in ITLS; Tylan Dee; Tonie Dee; and Andy Walker, department head of ITLS, at the Spring 2025 CEHS convocation ceremony.

In May 2024 and 2025, the Department of Instructional Technology and Learning Sciences (ITLS) in the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services bestowed graduate degrees on Tylan Dee (2024) and Tonie Dee (2025), a mother/son pair whose non-traditional journeys through higher education demonstrate dedication, discipline, and perseverance.

Tonie Dee was raised on the Navajo Nation, located in Black Mesa, Arizona. At the age of six, she was taken by Bureau of Indian Affairs officials to a boarding school in Kayenta, Arizona, where she attended school for two years. "My experience at the boarding school lacked love and positivity, yet it shaped my resilience," she said about those early years.

Later, she and her younger brother entered the Indian Student Placement Program where they attended public school in Tucson, Arizona. In both programs, the children attended school away from home and returned in the summer months. Because of her late start, Tonie Dee was behind in school for several years but determined early on to excel, even when it was difficult.

"For me, learning transformed into something profoundly meaningful. I developed an unquenchable thirst for knowledge and found joy in staying in class during lunch and after school," said Tonie Dee.

She earned a bachelor's degree from Brigham Young University in family and consumer science education in

1978. Her original plan was to begin a master's program immediately, but she decided instead to teach family and consumer science at Monument Valley School, a combined middle school and high school on the Navajo Nation. She stayed for 34 years. In the intervening years, Dee met and married her husband Howard, who was also a teacher at the school.

Although her desire to advance her education persisted, it wasn't until 2016, after she had been retired from San Juan School District for two years and had taken a position at the USU Blanding campus as an academic success mentor, that she finally decided to return to higher education.



Tonie Dee

"I always wanted to go back and do my master's, but it never seemed like the right time," explained Tonie Dee. "When you're an educator in the secondary schools you don't just teach school, you have tons of other responsibilities. While teaching, I embraced roles such as volleyball coach, drill team instructor, bus driver, and advisor for various clubs and classes. I knew there was no way I could do it, so I waited."

Tonie Dee ultimately selected an online graduate program in Instructional Technology and Learning Sciences. She loved learning the newest technology, particularly AI. "I liked the technology, and it seemed like [the coursework] would be a good fit for me," she said. "There are just so many things that you can use in your personal life,

especially the Adobe programs and the graphic arts class. My degree wasn't for an advancement in my career. It was just something I always wanted to do."

Tonie Dee was intent on finishing in two years, although she could have completed the program on a slower, less intense, schedule. She recalled that the first semester nearly brought her to a breaking point. "I questioned the purpose of a master's degree for me," she confessed. "To be honest, the beginning was challenging, and I nearly gave up. I wasn't used to Zoom meetings. I had to learn how to juggle my time, and for a while it got kind of hard for me."

Her son Tylan's journey, though very different from her own, has also been non-traditional and filled with personal drive. Tylan originally started his undergraduate degree soon after high school, where he graduated as class valedictorian, but he ultimately dropped out with low grades and took a job working in the cafeteria at USU Blanding.

Years later, he was offered a position in the admissions office and from there he decided to return to school. "Things just clicked for me," he said. "My goal was to finish my bachelor's and be done with school. Toward the end of my second semester, I surprised myself. I was getting straight As in all my classes. I just had that momentum."

Tylan Dee graduated with his bachelor's degree 14 years after high school, but he doesn't see the long gap as a problem. Instead, he sees it as a benefit to helping others, particularly in his role as an academic advisor at USU Blanding. "I think it helps me relate to my students," he said. "We get adult learners who take a long break from school and now want to come back and figure out what they want to do. I'm able to relate to a lot of adult learners in that respect." Tylan Dee has been an advisor since 2022 and was named USU's Outstanding New Advisor of the Year in 2024.



Tylan Dee

Contrary to his original plan, Tylan Dee immediately applied for and was accepted into the same online graduate program in Instructional Technology and Learning Sciences his mother would choose. "I've always had an interest in different uses for technology," he said. "I think that's where this program came together for me. It has aspects of utilizing today's technology that I relate to."

During graduate school, Tylan Dee was a recipient of the 2024 ITLS Master Scholar of the Year award. He also began teaching the Habits of Academic Success class at USU Blanding. "I was learning all these useful things that I could do with teaching—creating a canvas course, utilizing different technological methods," he explained. "Teaching wasn't part of my education or my job description, but it's something that I really enjoy doing. Each semester I've grown in teaching. I feel like I've slowly gotten better at it."

Tylan Dee earned his graduate degree in May 2024, a year before Tonie finished her degree, but he wasn't ready to leave the classroom behind yet. He began a doctoral program at the University of Utah in higher education leadership and administration. "At the end of my master's degree, I thought, 'If I don't do this now, I don't think I'll come back to it. I might as well apply. What's the worst that could happen? I could be denied, and I'd still be happy having my master's degree.'" He is now in his third semester of the program, focusing on helping indigenous students navigate the landscape of higher education.

Tylan Dee sees his mother's success of completing her degree as far above his own efforts of pursuing a doctoral degree. "Being part of her support system and seeing her accomplish her goal has been very fulfilling," he said. "She put her mind to it. She knew it was something she wanted to finish. I think being able to support someone who has been there for me every step of the way is one of the greatest things I could do. It's come full circle for us."

Two months ago, Tonie Dee was honored to address the students at the college's convocation exercises at USU Blanding. "Don't let obstacles and challenges deter you," she advised her fellow graduates. "Embrace the bumps in your life's road. Step out of your comfort zone and dare to try something new. When you want to do something, just go do it."