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STEP alumnus Martinez named Champion for Change

By DEBRA BANERJEE

When Keith Martinez first learned about the STEP program at Scarsdale High School as a teenager on the Lakota Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, he thought it could be his “big break or the key to reaching my dreams,” he told the Inquirer in 2011. He’s taken another step toward realizing his dreams of empowering his Lakota community. The 2012 SHS graduate and first Native American STEP student has now won national recognition for his work as the chairman of the nonprofit Lakota Children Enrichment’s Youth Advisory Board. The Aspen Institute’s Center for Native American Youth named the current Villanova sophomore and a Gates Millennium Scholar, a “Champion for Change.” Martinez was one of five young Native American leaders “who are creating positive changes for their peers and tribal or urban Indian communities,” the Aspen Institute said.

Martinez, 20, spent the week of March 9 in Washington, D.C., meeting with members of Congress, including Majority Leader Harry Reid and Sen. Heidi Heitkamp, tribal leaders from the National Congress of American Indians and with Native American youth.

On hand to support Martinez in Washington was Maggie Dunne of Scarsdale, founder and president of the Lakota Children’s Enrichment Inc. Dunne had nominated Martinez for the award. Martinez’s STEP dad, Brandon Steiner, came to Washington for the reception held on the last day.

“Receiving recognition as a ‘Champion for Change’ is



Keith Martinez with Sen. Tim Johnson of South Dakota and Maggie Dunne during the Champions for Change events in Washington, D.C.

a tremendous honor that I am truly grateful for, but this is a lot more than recognizing me,” Martinez said. “It is about placing a spotlight on the youth that face adversity in their everyday lives in many areas. Receiving this honor and recognition is a big step in the right direction for youth on the Pine Ridge Reservation and your support will further help this process. Once again I will like to say thank you to everyone who has supported me and my work with Lakota Children’s Enrichment, including the Scarsdale community, the STEP program, Scarsdale High School, the Steiners and the Dunnes,” Martinez wrote in an email to the Inquirer.

The Aspen Institute is an educational and policy studies organization based in Washington, DC. Its mission is to “foster leadership based on en-

during values and to provide a nonpartisan venue for dealing with critical issues,” according to its website.

The Center for Native American Youth was founded by former U.S. senator Byron Dorgan of North Dakota, who served as the chairman of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs before his retirement.

In December before the Champion for Change honor, Martinez was one of 51 students from around the country selected by Youth Service of America to serve as a National Child Awareness Month ambassador. For the next year, Martinez will represent South Dakota by working to advance the youth programs of Lakota Children’s Enrichment.

Martinez will join Maggie Dunne and her mother Cindy, part of the “volunteam” who

acts as CFO for Lakota Children’s Enrichment, on a trip to Pine Ridge this month. He will speak at an awards ceremony for Lakota Children’s Enrichment’s reservationwide writing challenge and at a youth summit celebrating Global Youth Service Day.

In an interview with the Inquirer at the Lakota Children’s Enrichment office on Scarsdale Avenue, space provided by Doug Metz of Scarsdale Insurance Agency, Maggie Dunne noted that the among the judges for the writing challenge will be Nobel Laureate Jody Williams, spoken word performer Jasmine Mans and Iranian American author and journalist Susanne Pari. The middle school and high school grand prizewinners’ schools will re-

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ceive \$1,000 grants for supplies funded by a grant to Lakota Children's Enrichment from the Scarsdale Rotary Club. The writing challenge gives a platform for Lakota children to share their dreams and let their voices be heard.

Martinez, who assumed the role on Lakota Children's Enrichment Youth Advisory Board in August 2013, will serve as a mentor to younger members and help them set goals and implement the ideas they have to make changes on the reservation. He will also be involved in strategic planning and will serve in an advisory capacity.

"He will help us figure out how to implement programs," Cindy Dunne said. "They have to be programs that they [Lakota youth] embrace. It's an effective way for us to move forward."

She said Martinez has served as a positive role model for his peers as he "strives for excellence."

Maggie Dunne said of Martinez's award: "It's been amazing, watching Keith grow. This has been a real partnership. I'm so excited for him. It's an opportunity for him to highlight native youth, to give them a platform. It's an incredible opportunity for the youth involved. I've seen his commitment to give back to the community."

Dunne, a 2013 magna cum laude graduate of Colgate Uni-



Keith Martinez speaking at the National Congress of American Indians Executive Council Winter Session. The week in Washington ended with the opportunity for the "champions" to be introduced to the NCAI.

versity, earned excellence and honors in Native American studies and received the university's highest award for a graduating senior. She has won many awards and accolades for her commitment to the Lakota, a cause that "chose her," she has said. In 2013 she was named to the top 50 "Next Generation Leaders" under the age of 25 by Women in the World Foundation. In 2012 she was the grand prizewinner in Glamour Magazine's Top 10 College Women Contest. She is in demand as a speaker on a variety of topics.

Dunne first became involved

with Pine Ridge in 2007 during a spring vacation trip organized by the Rev. Fran Wise Grenley. Members of the Youth Action Committee of Scarsdale Congregational Church went to work in a service program with RE-MEMBER, an organization serving the reservation. In the seven years she has been involved with Pine Ridge Reservation, the grassroots program has grown from coordinating clothing and book drives to a nationally recognized nonprofit involved in issues on a grander scale of community building, advocacy and leadership development through opportunities

in the arts, education, sports and mentorship.

Dunne is "moving in the direction" of creating an endowment for Lakota Children's Enrichment to keep the project going. She is looking for high school or college-age interns to work with her this summer. She also hopes more people will get involved.

Martinez's achievements as a Champion for Change will build Lakota youth confidence and counter the negative media narrative, Dunne said.

"When you see people doing it, it seems more possible for you," Cindy Dunne added.