

‘Everything that you do impacts future generations to come’: First member of Aquinnah Wampanoag to attend Harvard Law driven by sense of community

By [Gal Tziperman Lotan](#) Globe Staff, Updated May 2, 2021, 7:10 a.m.



Samantha Maltais will be the first member of the Wampanoag Tribe to enroll at Harvard Law School. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

Samantha Maltais’ mother likes to tell the story of how her then 7-year-old grew angry over a [violent raid on a smoke shop](#) that led to the arrests of members of the Narragansett Indian Tribe. “Don’t these people know we have rights?” the child had asked.

Maltais doesn’t remember asking that, but the story reflects her understanding, even at a young age, of how the law impacts day-to-day lives of Native people. She grew up on Martha’s Vineyard listening to tribal council meetings for the Aquinnah Wampanoag and to consultations with the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Her mother, Cheryl Andrews-Maltais, is chairwoman of the tribe.

This fall, Samantha Maltais will become the first member of the Aquinnah Wampanoag to enroll in Harvard Law School. She [won a full scholarship](#) from the American Indian College Fund.

“For Native people, for tribal citizens, our very existence is really directly impacted by federal Indian law and policy,” said Maltais, 24. “We’re inherently political people.”

A [2015 National Native American Bar Association](#) study estimated that there were about 2,640 Native attorneys nationwide — about 0.3 percent of all attorneys, though Indigenous people account for about 1.6 percent of the US population and about 65,356 have graduate or professional degrees.

“While the overall numbers of Native Americans may be smaller than other racial/ethnic groups, the extent of their underrepresentation in the legal profession is stark beyond measure,” members of the National Native American Bar Association wrote at the time.

Looking back at history, Maltais said she was often struck by how often the fate of tribal members in legal matters was left to outsiders who had to argue their cases in court.

“Having Native voices be part of the legal profession is only the first step in that healing process,” she said.

Harvard College was founded in part on a mission to educate “the English and Indian youth of this country,” according to its 1659 charter. The first Native American graduate of Harvard College, [Caleb Cheeshahteaumuck](#), was Wampanoag — he died a few months after his graduation in 1665. Still, no members of the Wampanoag tribe have graduated from Harvard Law School.

“Up until late in the 20th Century, many tribes had to get the approval of the federal government to hire their own attorneys,” said Heather Whiteman Runs Him, a professor of practice at the University of Arizona’s College of Law and director of the school’s Tribal Justice Clinic. “The fact that today, finally, we can look at going to law school — that indigenous youths have a path within their educational goals that includes reasonably and expectedly going to law school — is not something we’ve had for a long time. This is new.”

Whiteman Runs Him, a citizen of the Crow/Apsáalooke Nation and herself a 2002 Harvard Law School graduate, said she especially wanted to celebrate a member of a Massachusetts tribe being admitted.

“Coming to understand as Native people what our relationship is with the law is a lifelong journey, and maybe something that non-Native people don’t have to grapple with as we do,” Whiteman Runs Him said.

“Working to advocate for Indian communities is a calling, I think, for many indigenous youth. Especially today as we see the nature of the disputes and conflicts regarding tribal sovereignty — and our ability to protect our water, our land, our resources — expands and becomes more and more alarming and immediate,” she added.

When Whiteman Runs Him was at Harvard, she said, she found a small community of other Native students in the law school and in other graduate programs. Those friendships were vital to her, she said.

“It takes a community,” Whiteman Runs Him said. “You’re never going to be an isolated person doing these things, it’s always about your community, about your people, about their sovereignty, about their place in their framework going forward.”

Maltais studied government and Native American studies at Dartmouth College and, after graduating in 2018, joined the Peace Corps to work in the Kingdom of Tonga, an indigenous nation in the South Pacific Islands. Since July, she has worked as a consultant for Survival International, a United Kingdom-based organization advocating for indigenous people worldwide.

She applied to law school, she said, knowing that the degree would be another tool she could use to advocate for her community, to both respect and honor the work of the people who came before her and, she hopes, build a better world for generations after her.

When she told her family, they told her how excited they were and emphasized that they were not at all surprised: That her admission was a recognition of the hard work she has done so far, and that she belongs at a place like Harvard.

“Anything that I really hold near and dear to my heart, it usually stems from a childhood teaching that was from either my parents or my grandparents,” Malatis said.

“But I think one that sticks out specifically in the legal profession is recognizing all the sacrifices that people have made before you — and also recognizing that everything that you do impacts future generations to come.”

Gal Tziperman Lotan can be reached at gal.lotan@globe.com or at 617-929-2043.

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