

HEALING *hands*

Tri-C graduate Karen Posner finds a new career and a new purpose with the Lakota people.

Karen Posner was at a career crossroads when she arrived at Cuyahoga Community College. She was already in her 40s and had 15 years as a real estate agent under her belt. But at a time when many people begin to contemplate their readiness for eventual retirement, Posner was headed toward a career reboot.

In the aftermath of the 2008 and 2009 housing market crash, the Brook Park resident's real estate career was drying up before her eyes. Staying the course was no longer an option – she had to find a new career.

At Tri-C, she found that. She also found a new path in life.

“I actually started at Tri-C focusing solely on international business,” Posner said. “Once I realized my career in real estate was no longer a viable option, I decided I wanted to have a career where I could travel the world and work for human rights, which I’ve always been passionate about. I felt an international business degree would allow me to get into that type of work.”

But it was when Posner met Tri-C professors Tyler Olson and Susan Lohwater that the work turned into a mission. Olson introduced Posner to Tri-C’s Conflict Resolution and Peace Studies certificate program; Lohwater introduced her to the plight of Native Americans living on reservations throughout the Great Plains.

In particular, Posner was moved by the challenges faced by the Lakota people at the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota.

“Dr. Lohwater puts on an event called ‘Culture Shock’ at Tri-C West, and that’s where I heard about the problems at Pine Ridge – the low graduation rates, the high suicide rates,” Posner said. “I wanted to see more for myself.”

In March 2015, Posner coordinated a weeklong trip to Pine Ridge for Tri-C students and faculty. The contingent met with community organizations and tribal leaders and visited historical sites, including the site of the Wounded Knee Massacre of 1890.

The trip inspired her to create a nonprofit called Honor the Drums. The organization aims to improve the lives of those at Pine Ridge. Already, Posner has helped spearhead a book drive for the reservation’s library and organized a donation drive for prom dresses and tuxedos for the reservation’s high schoolers.

“For the book drive, we collected about 3,500 books and drove them to the reservation,” Posner said. “We let the kids there pick up the books, which was rewarding. They have a library to call their own.”

Posner graduated from Tri-C in 2015 with a Conflict Resolution and Peace



Karen Posner and daughter Nicole at the Ben Reifel Visitor Center in Badlands National Park, South Dakota. The park is partially located on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation.

Studies certificate. She received a scholarship to John Carroll University, from which she graduated this spring with a degree in Peace, Justice and Human Rights. She plans to study for a master's degree in youth counseling and eventually relocate to Pine Ridge.

“I want to live near the reservation and provide community services,” she said. “Youth counseling, suicide prevention, things like that. But that probably won’t happen for a few years yet. I have a daughter in high school, and I promised I wouldn’t move while she was still in school.”