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Winding Path

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Abstract
This is a film review of *Winding Path* (dëtetsi vo'î oninjakan) (2023), directed by Alexandra Lazarowich and Ross Kauffman.

Keywords
Indigenous, Native American, Health Disparities

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Author Notes
Monica Blizek is a retired mental health professional.
Winding Path (2023), dir. Alexandra Lazarowich and Ross Kauffman

This short documentary tells us the story of Jenna Murray, an Eastern Shoshone tribe member and MD-PhD student. Jenna tells us how she decided to become a physician through native influences and particularly her grandfather. Jenna reads from a letter she wrote some years ago: not remembering some of the parts she wrote, and sharing the warm, loving memories of her grandfather. We can see how his being and death reignited her spirit.

Jenna describes herself as an “urban Indian” in that she grew up in Las Vegas while spending the summers with extended family on the Wyoming Wind River Reservation. She would ride with her grandfather as he worked his ranch and tended to his horses. Jenna gained knowledge from him, the horses, her family, and the land itself. She talks about how the land can heal a wounded spirit. She watched as her grandfather expertly stitched up a horse’s wounded leg. He asked her to help tie the stitch knots and it was then that she decided to become a physician.
Like most teens, Jenna wanted to spend time with friends. She tried to share with them Native ways and spirituality, but they didn’t seem interested. Being a mixed person, Jenna didn’t feel part of either the White or Native world. These feelings silenced her voice and closed off her spiritual self. As an undergraduate student, she tried to balance life between studies and heavy drinking. Shortly after being accepted into a graduate medical program, she was asked to leave because her drinking was out of control and she regularly missed classes.

After a year or so of struggling, Jenna entered a recovery program. It was a Native American therapist who told her to go back to the ancestral land and “let the land heal [you].” Jenna talks of how she can smell sage and sweet grass when thinking about her grandfather, and her summers on the ranch.

Jenna’s grandfather died from a minor heart attack. Had there been access to more immediate healthcare on the reservation, he likely would have lived. Jenna’s grandmother performed CPR measures for 40 minutes before the ambulance could get to the farm.

Jenna clearly sees the numerous disparities of healthcare and the broken promises stated in the treaties signed years ago. She knows firsthand the problems untreated mental health issues and substance use caused for her and her people. Jenna also knows she will be able to make a difference for others by following her winding path to medical school and allowing the ancestral land to continue healing her spirit.