National Native American Heritage Month

Employee Spotlight

Victoria O’Keefe, PhD

Assistant Professor, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Department of International Health (Social and Behavioral Interventions Program), Center for American Indian Health

What is your role and area of research at the Bloomberg School of Public Health?

I’m an assistant professor within the Department of International Health in the Social and Behavioral Interventions Program and the Center for American Indian Health. Within the Center for American Indian Health, I work on the mental health team and have a focus on American Indian/Alaska Native suicide prevention.

How long have you been with Johns Hopkins?

I’m brand new here, this is my fourth week at Johns Hopkins!

What tribe(s) do you identify with?

I am a member of the Cherokee and Seminole Nations of Oklahoma.

How did you decide to focus on public health? How does your heritage influence what you do?

I’m actually a clinical psychologist by training. Suicide is a large public health problem and is often addressed through an interdisciplinary approach.

In 2009, I had a summer internship with a tribal community in Oklahoma. A client there told me that he had just lost a loved one to suicide, and added, “There isn’t anyone around here who hasn’t lost someone to suicide.” This conversation was one of the most impactful moments in my life. I knew then that my career path was going to be focused on suicide prevention and intervention within Native communities. All of the work I do is with tribal communities in my mind and heart, collaborating directly with them to end suicide as a norm.

What are some fun things about you that you want readers to know?

I’ve given a TedX talk (TedXOStateU, at Oklahoma State University).

How do you celebrate your heritage personally?

There are so many ways my identity and culture are with me on a daily basis, but a few things include: jingle dress dancing; attending the annual Cherokee National Holiday in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, where I dance at the powwow and participate in the blowgun contest (I’ve won third place in two separate years!); beadwork; and activism to protect indigenous land and culture against environmental injustices and to combat the use of stereotypical images. Also, I’m new to the area, but have connected with some of the Native organizations here and have attended a number of their local meetings and events. I also love buying clothing and jewelry made by Native artists!

What do you want readers to know about Native Americans?

“Native Americans” is an umbrella term but it doesn’t fully capture the tremendous diversity of culture, values, language and practices of the 567 federally recognized tribes, hundreds of state recognized tribes and numerous tribes without federal or state recognition.

Who are your heroes?

I have so many, but one of my heroes is definitely the late Wilma Mankiller. She was the first female chief of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma. In one of my favorite quotes—one that I aim to live out—she said, “The most fulfilled people are the ones who get up every morning and stand for something larger than themselves. They are the people who care about others, who will extend a helping hand to someone in need or will speak up about an injustice when they see it.”

What mark do you hope to leave on Johns Hopkins, the nation, indigenous nations or the world?

I’ve been inspired by the collaborative work between Johns Hopkins Center for American Indian Health and tribal communities, specifically on suicide prevention. I’m hoping my partnership with tribal communities on culturally tailored intervention can lead to reduced suicide rates and ultimately ZERO suicide.