
Denise Thronas

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Balancing family, pueblo life and a career

Denise Thronas lives in Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo (formerly San Juan) just north of Española and commutes every day to her work in the Laboratory's Manufacturing Engineering and Technologies Division. During her morning drive she leaves her family and the tight-knit tribal community in which she was born and raised behind and often reflects on how the women in her family have balanced their family and community life with the ability to seek varying levels of education and earn a living.

Thronas' maternal grandmother seamlessly combined her family, community and work life by taking in tailoring and laundry work inside her pueblo home. Thronas' mother by comparison received a full college scholarship but had to quit after her father unexpectedly passed away. She raised her children as a single mother by working for St. Vincent's Hospital in Santa Fe and returning to Ohkay Owingeh at night.

But Thronas' mother also periodically participated in job-related continuing education opportunities at Missouri State University in St. Louis, and Thronas remembers one particular time quite well, because it was painful for her to be separated from her mom.

"I must have been about four or five years old," Thronas recalls. "My grandmother and I were seeing my mom off at the Albuquerque airport, and in those days you could still walk out onto the tarmac. As my mom said good-bye and turned to walk toward the plane, I ran under the ropes and hung on to her until she gently explained that she would only be gone a few weeks. The memory has stuck with me, because it signifies the choices adults have to make to balance their different responsibilities and priorities."

Thronas became the first person in her family to complete a college education but worried whether she would be able to find a job near her beloved Ohkay Owingeh. She initially worked for an environmental laboratory in Santa Fe for several years, then joined Los Alamos in 1992.

Balance with added benefits

As her car makes its way toward the Laboratory, it's difficult for Thronas to leave her family and community, but she enjoys her work and the intellectual stimulation that it brings, and she also enjoys the professional community that she has built with her colleagues.

"I always felt like an oddball in college," Thronas says, "because no one looked like me in my classes. At Los Alamos, I've been fortunate in finding people who not only share my academic and work interests but have gone out of their way to make me feel welcome and an integral part of the team. Last summer my group leader and some staff members put together an informal quiz about Native American culture and history, for example, and several of my team members have watched the *Canes of Power* documentary to learn about tribal sovereignty."

Although her busy days rarely allow time for herself, Thronas somehow manages to successfully combine her family life with her commitments to her pueblo and career communities and to enrich each in the process.

And Thronas feels enriched herself, in part because belonging to a professional circle of colleagues gives her something that she is not used to from a traditional approach to tribal society: the ability to contribute and be recognized on an individual basis.

"The sense of community is at the core of the tribal experience," Thronas explains, "but while it's important and nourishing to blend in and feel part of a whole, from an individual point of view it's also vital to have a sense of personal impact and empowerment."

For Thronas, especially women living and working in patriarchal settings often have missed out on opportunities to take on larger roles and to be an equal partner in decision-making processes.

"I recently watched *A Thousand Voices*," Thronas says, "a documentary that tells the story of Native American women in New Mexico, and I was struck by all of the powerful ways by which native women nowadays are able to help themselves, their families and their tribal and professional communities."

Thronas reflects for a second, then adds, "Without women's full participation, people only take advantage of half of their resources. With women's complete involvement, everyone wins."

Thronas works for the Manufacturing Engineering and Technologies Division's [Actinide Engineering and Science](#) group.

Resources

- [A Thousand Voices](#) (video trailer)
 - [Canes of Power](#) (video trailer)
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(505) 667-7000

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