What started as an idea to bring friends and colleagues together over a meal of traditional American Indian and Alaska Native foods from across America, amounted to much more than I could have ever hoped.

As a requirement to receive my Masters of Public Health and Masters of Social Work, from the George Warren Brown School of Social Work at Washington University in St. Louis, I acquired an internship with the Kathryn M. Buder Center for American Indian Studies, in May, 2013. The Buder Center, originally founded to provide scholarships for American Indians, has grown into a renowned organization developing future leaders who will serve in Indian Country.

Earlier in the year, the Director of the Buder Center, Dr. Molly Tovar, was approached by Risa Zwerling, the wife of the Chancellor of Washington University in St. Louis. She charged Dr. Tovar with the task of holding a traditional American Indian and Alaska Native meal for the campus to enjoy. Dr. Tovar thought this the perfect opportunity for the interns, Jonelle Battise (Alabama-Choushata), Joe Masters (Sault Ste. Marie Band of Chippewa Indians) and me to gain practical experience in program planning and implementation.

Background research was gathered through literature reviews, informal informational interviews and evaluations of existing programs. While this piece of program planning is often overlooked, it was necessary in order to demonstrate the need for the program and gain support from potential collaborators.

With seemingly perfect timing, the Mighty Mississippians, a team of individuals from Christner Inc., an architectural firm in St. Louis, won a two-year lot lease through the Sustainable Land Lab competition. Their proposal featured an approach rooted in St. Louis history, to re-imagine the vacant lot in Old North St. Louis as an asset for sustainability. The Mighty Mississippians sought cultural assistance from the Buder Center and, in return, offered their traditional crops for use throughout the program.

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In addition to collaboration with the Mighty Mississippians, we were extremely fortunate to receive unwavering support from members of Bon Appetit, Washington University’s dining services. Seeing the
After six months of planning, it was finally the weekend of the event. It all came together on Sunday, November 4, 2013, as Chef Craig shared his experiences of being a Native chef with over 80 students, faculty, staff and community members. He discussed how he decolonizes the culinary history of the Americas in an effort to strengthen shared resiliency, while demonstrating his cooking techniques at a free event, open to the public. Additionally, Chef Craig provided culinary consultation to Bon Appetit chefs, while preparing a multi-course meal for select honorary guests.

The outcome of the Sunday demonstration and Monday dinner exceeded our expectations. There were obvious benefits for the attendees, but I never expected to gain so much, personally, from Chef Nephi Craig.

In all, Chef Craig was in St. Louis for about three and a half days. Seemingly endless, (not accustomed to the chef lifestyle of having dinner at 10 pm) each day ended in physical exhaustion; however, I was mentally rejuvenated. I picked Nephi’s brain at every opportunity and connected his drive and rationale, for what he does, to mine. Listening to Chef Craig’s experiences and future goals gave me affirmation that I will be able to make a difference in Indian Country. The painstaking group projects and sleepless nights of my graduate school career suddenly seemed meaningful.

What began as an idea to bring friends and colleagues together, over a meal of traditional American Indian and Alaska Native foods from across America, amounted to a life-changing experience for which I am forever grateful.

(Jamie Ishcomer is a member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma and attends George Warren Brown School of Social Work, Washington University in St. Louis. She is a MPH, MSW Candidate, December, 2013)