Lakota Mower (South Dakota ’06) flipped her reservation’s typical trajectory of success: Instead of leaving home, she returned to make it better.

1 What makes your work different compared to economic development in, say, a large city? We don’t turn anyone away—we can’t. We acknowledge and honor the gifts that each client brings to us, and even if they don’t qualify for a loan, we at least allow them to use our resources. It’s because we’re nation builders. Most non-Native organizations doing similar work wouldn’t call themselves that. But we’re responsible for the future of our Lakota nation, and that changes how we see our work.

2 Have any clients been especially inspiring? There’s a man named Don Bettelyoun who started Lakota Mower (South Dakota ’06) grew up on the Cheyenne River Indian Reservation, in the tiny town of Promise, S.D. While teaching high school special education on the Rosebud Sioux Reservation, about 200 miles to the south, the University of Notre Dame alumna came to understand that great schools were not enough to lift a community burdened by multi-generational poverty. She returned to Cheyenne River in 2011, where she is now the assistant director at Four Bands Community Fund, a nonprofit that works with locals to secure loans, access capital, and start small businesses. “In Lakota we talk about ‘building for the seventh generation,’” Mowrer says. “That’s the generation that will get Native people back to self-sufficiency. That’s what we’re building for.” / By Leah Fabel (Chicago ’01)

a construction business—Diamond D Construction. He’d always done construction on the side, and he decided that he wanted to expand, so we were able to help him with that—things like a business plan, and help with his accounting. The unemployment rate on Cheyenne River is near 80 percent, and he’s been able to create 15 jobs, which is huge.

3 What did you miss the most during your years away from Cheyenne River? Home for me is a feeling of being complete. When I was at Notre Dame, or in St. Louis [for graduate school], or in D.C. [for work], I felt something missing. Now, I drive 42 miles to work every day, and in the morning I can see open land for miles and miles. Driving home, I can see the stars across the entire sky—it’s just so beautiful. It makes me grateful; it restores me.

4 Which of your values was most challenged while you lived away from the reservation? The one I will always struggle with, and the one that really brought me home again, is humility. At Notre Dame, and with Teach For America, there was this sense of feeling important, and in some ways it really threw me off. But when I returned home, it was all about humility. Where my degrees come from doesn’t really matter to this community. Who I am as a person matters.

5 Has returning home challenged your idea of success? A lot of people define success as doing better than your parents did, and around here, a lot of people do that by leaving the community. I have a lot of friends who’ve grown up and moved elsewhere, and I guess that’s supposed to be the successful trajectory—you leave poverty and never come back. Sometimes, to friends or to family, I have to defend that I returned. I haven’t totally figured it out yet, but I do think you can still be a model for happiness and success by returning to your community, instead of by leaving it.

College enrollment and graduation rates have gone up in the United States. But so have tuition and the student debt load—way up. The cost of higher education has hit low-income American families the hardest. In 2010, households with incomes in the lowest 20 percent owed nearly 25 cents of student debt for every dollar earned, compared to about 5 cents on the dollar for the top 20 percent.
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Lakota Mowrer (South Dakota ‘06) flipped her reservation’s typical trajectory of success: Instead of leaving home, she returned to make it better.

TAKE FIVE

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FYI

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Average cost of tuition, room, and board at a four-year college (adjusted for inflation)

Average outstanding student loan balance (in 2011 dollars)

Percentage of the nation’s households owing student debt

Sources: U.S. Department of Education, Pew Research Center

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<th>Year</th>
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<th>Average Balance</th>
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