

2024 Michael John Kennedy Scholarship Award Winning Essay

The fourth Michael John Kenney Scholarship award winner, Mikayla Novac, is a Junior at the Metropolitan State University of Denver where she is pursuing a bachelor's degree in applied psychology. Mikayla also serves in the United States Armed Forces.

The legacy of the Potawatomi warriors is a profound testament to resilience, courage, and a commitment to protecting and preserving the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. These warriors would fight on physical battlefields as well as spiritual ones, steadfast in their charge to ensure our traditions, language, and culture survived through generations. Their sacrifice and dedication have become the bedrock for which the strength and unity of our nation stand on today.

Potawatomi warriors have long exemplified a holistic approach to being a warrior—one that intertwines native spirituality with effective war skills. From a young age, children learned combat skills while simultaneously building metaphysical connections to powerful Mnedok (spirits). This melding of physical prowess and spiritual grounding created warriors who were not only formidable in battle but also deeply rooted in their beliefs and values. A warrior, in the Potawatomi tradition, was expected to be whole, embodying the strength of both body and spirit.

Through my time as a Guardian in the U.S. Space Force, and as an Airman in the U.S. Air Force, I have felt deeply connected to this holistic approach. In the Air Force, we are taught four pillars of resiliency; Mental, Physical, Social, and Spiritual. If maintained, these four pillars can help you overcome any obstacle. Learning about the wisdom of the Potawatomi warriors felt like divine confirmation. Being a warrior isn't just about physical strength and skill. It is about exemplifying spiritual strength. It is also about fostering a strong deep connection with your own tribe; helping your brothers in arms, and also leaning on them when you need help.

Additionally, the sacrifices made by the Potawatomi warriors serve as a reminder that freedom is not free—not for our tribe or for our country. Freedom is built off the backs of courage, commitment, and sacrifice. It can be easy sometimes to take for granted. It is something I am reminded of every time I see a POW/MIA table at formal military events; and every time I learn something new about the Potawatomi history or learn a new word in the native Neshnabémwen language. The legacy of the Potawatomi warriors has instilled in me a sense of pride and commitment to honoring the freedoms they fought for.

In my life currently, I strive to embody the Potawatomi warrior's ideal of being whole, integrating my beliefs and values with the strength and discipline I developed through my service. Their legacy has taught me that a true warrior stands firm in the face of adversity, honor their commitments, and never forget the sacrifices made for freedom and identity. As I continue to navigate my path, I carry with me the lessons of the warriors who came before me, knowing that their spirit lives on in every step I take.