

## **Ethel Branch Web Bio**

### **BORN AND RAISED ON THE NAVAJO NATION**

Ethel Branch was born in Tuba City and was raised on her family's ranch ten miles south of the Leupp Chapter House. She grew up herding sheep and cattle, and hauling water for her family and their livestock. Some of her fondest memories from her youth are of the family sheep shearings, brandings, and cattle drives to the Leupp auction yard. Her first business transaction was trading some of her goats to her father for a white mare when she was nine years old. Her first paying job was herding cattle for an elderly neighbor when she was twelve.

### **FAMILY VALUES AND EDUCATION**

Ethel was fortunate to come from a family that placed a great deal of importance on education. In fact, her family has a tradition of seeking higher education. Her mother, aunts, and uncles participated in the Indian Student Placement Program and attended colleges in Utah and Arizona. Her uncle, Dr. Bahe Billy, was the first Diné to earn a Ph.D. from the University of Arizona in 1970. Her father only completed the sixth grade before he ran away to become a cowboy. Because of this he had deep respect for education and encouraged Ethel to excel in school and come back to serve her people.

Ethel worked hard in school and prepared for a path to college. She followed the words of Chief Manuelito to take education as the ladder to success. Ethel attended Leupp Public School and graduated from Winslow High School. She ran Varsity Track and Cross Country and led numerous clubs, including the Future Business Leaders of America. She also led the Winslow Wranglers 4-H Horsemanship Club and participated in National 4-H leadership activities. In her senior year and during her first year of college, she served as Rodeo Queen for the Winslow West's Best Rodeo, inheriting the title from her younger sister, Lupita.

Always one to rise to a challenge, she chose to attend Harvard College for her undergraduate education. The extreme isolation from home and family made for a tough experience, especially since her parents didn't have a telephone. Nonetheless, Ethel was raised to be strong and resilient and stay the course. She graduated with a degree in History with honors. Upon completion, she returned home with a mission to give back to her community as her father, family, and friends had encouraged her to do all her life.

### **COMMITTED TO SERVICE AND JUSTICE**

Growing up, Ethel always wondered why there was such a stark difference in living and economic conditions between communities located on and off the reservation. She wondered why things changed so starkly when you crossed the reservation line. She wondered why she couldn't open up a refrigerator and access cold milk for cereal like the poorest kid off reservation could. Her young mind questioned why she had to use an outhouse and haul water while her neighbors had easy access to running water in their homes. She quickly concluded that such differences were not right. These injustices bothered Ethel deeply as a child, but she found no answers in the history books in her public high school, where Indigenous People and Nations were only talked about in the first chapter, and in a severely limited way that relegated them to the past. It wasn't until college that she learned the true history of this country and the way law had been used as a tool to dispossess

Indigenous Nations of their land, resources, and wealth. This inspired her to study law so she could learn how to take this oppressive and unjust system apart and ensure equity and justice for her people.

Ethel graduated from college and headed home because she missed Diné Bikéyah and her family so badly. She also wanted to pull up more young, talented Diné youth behind her by encouraging them to dream big and capitalize on their full potential as she had been fortunate to do. In college she often wondered what happened to her Leupp Public School classmates, particularly those smarter than she was. She wondered why they weren't at Harvard with her, and whether they had made it to college at all.

Upon returning home, Ethel served as the Headmistress of Diné Southwest High School in Seba Dalkai. She was inspired by the school's mission to grow Diné children's learning in both Navajo and Western knowledge. She felt this was necessary to produce bright, young Diné who would follow her path and bring the knowledge and skills they gained from the outside back home to enrich their Diné communities. Based on her college studies on Nation Building, Ethel came home with the belief that the Navajo Nation's greatest asset is its people, and that they are the key to economic development and prosperity for the Navajo Nation.

## **ELEVATING OUR PEOPLE AND GIVING BACK**

While teaching, Ethel was reminded of the significant barriers our children face in coming to the classroom ready to learn. Ethel realized that the challenge of economic development needed to be tackled head-on for our children to have a fighting chance in the classroom. Otherwise, families would continue to be separated by parents leaving to seek off-reservation jobs and economic opportunities. Thus, Ethel saw the need to return to school and study law and policy where she would obtain the tools necessary to transform our Nation and usher in the wealth and opportunity that our people deserve. The restoration of balance is vital in order to allow the Diné people opportunities equal to our American counterparts.

Before returning to school, Ethel followed her heart and worked at the Center for Indian Education at Arizona State University. There she managed a grant to reinvigorate the bilingual program at Rough Rock Community School that was once the premier program of its kind in the United States. In her role, she worked to help the school "grow its own" bilingual teachers by helping bilingual teaching assistants complete their bachelor's degrees in teaching so they could become fully certified teachers. She also helped non-Navajo teachers at the school earn Master's degrees in bilingual and multicultural education by bringing ASU instructors to Rough Rock to teach courses on-site.

## **EXPERIENCE AND A RECORD OF SUCCESS**

After working in education, Ethel returned to Harvard to seek advanced degrees in law and policy. After graduation, she sought training in the practice of law off-reservation so that when she returned home she would bring refined skills and knowledge to bear on the challenges facing the Navajo Nation. In her first job, she became Bond Counsel to the Navajo Nation by joining the pre-eminent public finance practice in the country at Orrick, Herrington & Sutcliffe. After that, Ethel practiced indigenous human rights law in Washington, D.C., and then joined Kanji & Katzen PLLC, the leading litigation firm representing Indigenous Nations in their defense of tribal treaty rights. While living in Seattle, she served as Co-Chair of the Seattle Human Rights Commission and helped

pass a law by the City replacing Columbus Day with Indigenous Peoples Day. This helped spark a nationwide movement to do the same in other cities and states.

After years of legal practice in the areas of tribal finance, Indigenous human rights, treaty rights protection, and litigation, Ethel was asked to come home to serve as the Navajo Nation's 11th Attorney General. Ethel was humbled by this opportunity and accepted it. It was finally time to come home and serve her people directly.

## **PROVEN INTEGRITY AND LEADERSHIP**

Ethel served with distinction as the 11th Navajo Nation Attorney General, holding the federal government, state governments, and other parties accountable for their actions on the Navajo Nation, and with respect to the Diné people. She did this through filing landmark litigation to defend the Navajo Nation and its farmers against polluters at the Gold King Mine. This has resulted in over \$41 million in settlement money being paid to the Navajo Nation thus far. She also fought to defend the Navajo people from predatory and abusive banking practices by Wells Fargo, and filed a lawsuit against them that resulted in Wells Fargo paying \$6.5 million dollars to the Navajo Nation. She worked to protect our sacred sites, ceremonial plants and natural resources at Bears Ears National Monument by advocating for the establishment of the Monument and by suing President Trump to defend the National Monument. She also helped to protect the Diné people from opioids by filing a lawsuit on behalf of the Navajo Nation against opioids suppliers, distributors, and manufacturers.

During her tenure as Attorney General, Ethel worked to ensure that the Navajo Nation government followed its own laws and operated with integrity. One of her proudest achievements was to strengthen the Nation's public safety system by uniting the Judicial Branch, Department of Public Safety, Office of the Prosecutor, Office of the Public Defender, Division of Social Services and Department of Behavioral Health to coordinate services and resources for our peoples' safety. Her goal was to improve the system enough that when someone called the police for help, there would be a timely police response, a timely prosecution, timely disposition by the courts, and engagement by auxiliary services to assist families in distress and promote healing so they didn't end up in the criminal justice system again. Under her leadership, and in collaboration with others, the Diné Action Plan was completed. The plan provides a framework for a coordinated Navajo Nation response to violent crime, substance abuse, and suicide.

Attorney General Branch elevated Diné leadership within the Department of Justice and the Office of the Prosecutor by appointing Diné attorneys to fill most Assistant Attorney General positions and the Chief Prosecutor position. She filled all but four vacant legal positions. This was critical in increasing the stability, productivity, and efficiency of the Nation's legal offices.

## **DRIVEN BY A DEEP LOVE FOR OUR DINÉ PEOPLE**

After her term as Attorney General, Ethel returned to private practice with her former law firm. Not long after, duty to serve the people of the Navajo Nation called again. When COVID-19 arrived in the United States, Ethel was serving as General Counsel to another tribe that was taking aggressive measures to protect its community from the existential threat posed by the pandemic by shutting down its borders. Meanwhile, Navajo Nation was slow to act in defending its borders from COVID.

Ethel was greatly alarmed by this lack of action. The number of infections was rising and the death

toll was on an upward tick. She knew the situation was serious and immediate action was critical, so with her 3-month-old son on her lap she went to work. To address the lack of resources available to Navajo and Hopi citizens, such as PPE, food and water, which was compounded by the high expense required for people to isolate and shelter in place for the recommended 14-day period, she established a GoFundMe crowdfunding campaign to raise money to purchase and distribute essential items to elders and other high-risk populations on the reservation. The response from the Navajo people was astounding! On the first day, the campaign raised over \$5,000, and within four days \$100,000 was raised. To meet the needs of the communities across Navajo and Hopi lands, Ethel immediately enlisted the help of a dozen incredible Diné and Hopi women leaders to help launch a comprehensive COVID-19 response on the two nations. This quickly became the largest Indigenous grassroots campaign in the country, mobilizing over 1,000 volunteers.

While most aspects of the Navajo economy shut down, Ethel and her team created over 30 jobs for Navajo people. Two years later, the Navajo & Hopi Families COVID-19 Relief Fund has made almost half a million deliveries to Navajo and Hopi tribal members that contained over \$12 million worth of food, water, and PPE. The team has formed a state-based nonprofit seeking federal designation, and has opened its inaugural Innovation Hub in Monument Valley to rebuild a local Diné economy, strengthen culture and language transmission, foster local food security, and otherwise ensure that our Nation will be pandemic-proof and climate change resilient into the future. Two new Innovation Hubs will be launched in Sheep Springs and Ramah in the coming months.

Ethel, now hopes to marshal the resources of the Navajo Nation government to ensure that the gaps exposed by COVID-19 get filled, that our Nation is well-positioned to respond to any future existential threats, and that our government actually serves our people. She understands the urgency of these things and will work hard to ensure swift deployment of relief and services to our people at the hogan level. As someone who grew up without running water, electricity, and paved roads, Ethel knows the struggle of our people in remote areas and is committed to closing the equity gaps that prevent our people from enjoying 21st century living conditions.

## **MOTHERHOOD**

Since 2015, Ethel has embraced the role of co-guardian to her three nieces with her mother in order to ensure a safe home for them to thrive in. In 2019, she was blessed to become a mother to a bright, mischievous, and all-around wonderful little boy. Like her mother did with her, Ethel spends lots of time speaking to her son, reading to him, and spending time on nature walks. Their favorite pastimes include spending time playing in her son's sandbox, coloring, tending their garden, visiting his másání and her animals, or visiting his all-time favorite place: the playground. At home they enjoy spending time with their cat, their two bunnies, and their churro lamb "Lambchop."