

# Zuni Cruz turns an academic eye on indigenous values, law

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“You’re my lawyer, you’re my doctor, yeah, but somehow you forgot about me.”

Using lyrics by **Gil Scott-Heron** in a scholarly legal article is a bit unusual, but **Christine Zuni Cruz** is used to blazing her own path.

A professor at the **University of New Mexico** School of Law, she is the founder and former director of the school’s Southwest Indian Law Clinic and editor-in-chief of the Tribal Law Journal, the only online academic journal that focuses on indigenous tribal laws. And she has helped pioneer an area of legal scholarship and clinical practice focused on integrating indigenous tribal values and beliefs into tribal law.

“Christine’s work is creative,” said **Margaret Montoya**, a professor at the law school who has worked closely with Cruz. “She frequently has not had a model for her work and has had to create things on her own.”

**Kevin Washburn**, dean of the UNM School of Law, said Cruz has been “a brilliant entrepreneur in legal academics,” particularly in launching the law journal and the Indian law clinic.

“Both of those were path-breaking operations and have been cornerstones of our Indian law program at UNM,” he said.

Cruz used the Scott-Heron song lyrics in a 1999 article for the Clinical Legal Review about entering, or returning to, Native communities as a lawyer. Her own experience was very challenging, she said. Her father is from Isleta Pueblo, her mother from Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo. She considers Isleta her home, but grew up in other places because her father worked for the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs. When she graduated from **Stanford University**, she was determined to return home. It was a difficult journey.

“You have to be aware of your own community and its values and the values embedded in the education you’ve been immersed in,” Cruz said.

She drew on those experiences to inform her legal career, and her teaching of law students.

“Whether you’re indigenous or not, you need to think about how you enter communities,” she said.

Cruz had considered going into filmmaking after graduating from Stanford in 1980. But New Mexico’s film industry wasn’t much at the time, and she felt a calling to stay close to home after so many years away. She had toyed with the idea of law. So when she was recruited for a program at the Antioch School of Law in Washington, D.C., she saw it as a way to determine if a legal career was what she wanted.

The program trained paralegals to work in Indian Country. She worked at Albuquerque Legal Aid and started an outreach program for Native clients. She went into the program doubtful about being an American Indian with a law degree.

“I was concerned law did change you in some way,” she said. “I didn’t want to be this elite with this disconnection to the people.”

But once she got in, she was hooked, mostly by the Native students she met at Antioch.

“They had heart,” Cruz said. “It was just finding students who were very close to their communities and interested in using law as a tool to support Native peoples in a quest to support their cultures.”

Cruz graduated in 1982 from UNM’s law school, and did consulting work at the U.S. Attorney’s Office and the Justice Department. While working with Indian Pueblo Legal Services, she was recruited to apply for the position of chief judge at Laguna Pueblo. She also has been a judge on the Southwest Indian Intertribal Court of Appeals, and served as chief judge for Taos Pueblo for three years.

During that period, she became increasingly uncomfortable with the inconsistencies between the values in the written law of indigenous nations and the values embedded in those societies, Cruz wrote in the Tribal Law Journal. She cited as an example being the authority figure in a tribal traffic court where she was a non-member, younger and female, and before her was an elder man, which created a reversal of roles under the typical norms in pueblo society.

Her judicial positions spurred her interest in writing and research. A teaching stint sparked an interest in that field as well. So she began to pursue an academic career and was hired at UNM in 1993 to start the Southwest Indian Law Clinic.

It has become a model for Indian law clinics around the country, Montoya said. She recommended Cruz for the Pincus Award, which she won earlier this year. It’s the most prestigious award in the country for clinical law professors.

Cruz said the Tribal Law Journal was designed as a place to promote indigenous legal traditions, and intellectual discussions of indigenous tradition and American law.

“Tribal courts are based on American law, but you have this indigenous, ongoing legal tradition embedded in people and in oral language and in texts,” she said. “You have to figure out how they sit together, and that’s an incredible legal challenge.”

Lawyers and law students face the same rifts, she added. Lawyering for a community on “the outside” means aggressively protecting things like water rights and sovereignty. But lawyering on the inside is different.

“What are you bringing in, what are you espousing?” she said. “What are clients’ goals in the community that they belong to, and where they will be from birth to death, and how does that change how you craft a legal solution?”

For instance in domestic violence cases, both parties will most likely remain in the same community.

“It’s not enough to make a woman safe,” she said. “You have to think about it differently and get at the underlying cause of the violence if you want to stop it.”

**Derrick Lente**, owner of Spherion Staffing Services, worked with Cruz on the Tribal Law Journal and credits her with helping him get through law school and being an excellent role model. He now is an adjunct at UNM’s main campus, teaching federal Indian law.

“She understood what it was like to be a Native student in a predominantly non-Native society,” Lente said. “She had lived the life, she knew the intricacies and how touchy this stuff can be.”

Students can be very energizing, Cruz said.

“The older you get, that interaction with the students is really what keeps you fresh,” she added.

Cruz will return to the classroom this fall after a sabbatical. She has been working on a research project about indigenous identity in the 21st century.

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