



## OFFICE OF NAVAJO NATION HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

P.O. BOX 129 | ST. MICHAELS, NAVAJO NATION (AZ) 86511  
PHONE: 928-871-7436 | FAX: 928-871-7437

### Immediate Release:

October 27, 2022

### Death, the Afterlife, Grief and Renewal: A Remembrance of Diné Traditional Knowledge with Steven A. Darden



Photo: Steven A. Darden

**St. Michael, Navajo Nation (ARIZ)** – The University of New Mexico’s Institute of American Indian Research (“IFAIR”) in collaboration with the UNM Navajo Language Program, American Studies, the Alfonso Ortiz Center, the Law School, and the Navajo Nation Human Rights Commission (“Commission”) are hosting a lecture on “Diné/Navajo Stories about Death, the Afterlife, Grief and Renewal.” presented by Steven A. Darden (Diné/Navajo and Cheyenne). Darden will share his research on Diné traditional concepts around death, the afterlife, and burials.

In 2021, Darden was awarded a prestigious Luce Indigenous Knowledge Fellowship to continue the work of the Commission’s investigation into Navajo concerns about border town funeral home businesses and their possible deceptive and exploitative practices. The Commission’s report, “Mortuary Services and Funeral Planning: Advocating for the Return of Navajo Traditional Burial,” details their findings that Diné largely follow Western and Christian thought and practice when it comes to making funeral and burial plans.

As a Luce Fellow, Darden led the Commission in the next phase of their study by interviewing traditional practitioners who hold knowledge about the cycle of life with attention to the end of life, death. Darden hopes to reclaim traditional knowledge about how our ancestors thought about life and death, grief and trauma, and former burial protocols. For Diné, these topics are often considered taboo, making it especially difficult to address the monopoly that border town businesses have on funerals.

*-More-*

In his presentation, Darden will share his research in which he interviewed traditional practitioners who shared stories and prayers about death, the afterlife, burial protocols, and hope that have been passed on for generations. Darden describes returning a body to the earth as “replanting.” He observes that it is important to share this cultural knowledge with Navajo youth and young adults in order to return to respectful, traditional end-of-life processes.

This cultural knowledge that Darden is gathering is especially important during the current health crisis. In 2020, the Navajo Reservation was hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic. At the height of the pandemic, the Navajo Nation had the highest rate of COVID-19 infections per capita in the United States.

The Diné community has already lost tribal elders and traditionalists because of COVID-19. Darden recognizes that learning and sharing this knowledge is a race against time. He hopes his work will empower the Diné community to remember their former knowledge and care about the Diné cycle of life and death. He firmly believes that it is time for Navajo citizens to take control of how they care for the bodies of loved ones once life ends.

**What: Diné/Navajo Stories about Death, the Afterlife, Grief and Renewal lecture**

**When:** Thursday, November 17, 2022

**Time:** 4:00 a.m. - 6:00 p.m.

**Where: University of New Mexico Law School | Room 2401**

1117 Stanford Dr NE, Albuquerque, NM 87106

A reception immediately following will be catered by Cleo’s Blue Corn Kitchen. Parking in the L lot at the UNM Law School is free. For more information contact the Navajo Nation Human Rights Commission at 928-871-7436 or email: [hernands@unm.edu](mailto:hernands@unm.edu). The lecture is free and open to the public.

###