

# Where the Buffalo Roam

## Dr. Tolani Francisco APHIS Epidemiologist and 'Vet Detective'

By Joe Montgomery

Dr. Tolani Francisco, class of 1990, is the Area Epidemiology Officer in Colorado. She became involved with APHIS after learning they had a program for practitioners to become federal veterinarians. Her job consists of managing program diseases, keeping databases and tracking disease outbreaks in Colorado, and rating how the state ranks on a national basis.

The most appealing aspect of her job, Dr. Francisco states, is the travel. Some places she has been to include: Bolivia (while working for the USDA as the FMD coordinator for the Departments of Beni and Pando in charge of overseeing a vaccination program for over 5 million head of cattle); the United Kingdom (spending three months working on FMD); Alaska (to work on the Caribou and Reindeer villages around Nome and Kotzebuk); and most recently Cairo, Egypt, (to work on the Avian Influenza problem in the Egyptian Delta region).

"I never imagined I would be working for the government," said Dr. Francisco. "I have always wanted to open a clinic on my reservation in New Mexico, but financial obligations have prohibited that since I know the area is greatly impoverished. Now, in the work I do, I rely heavily upon the education I received from Dr. John Noordsy and Dr. David Schoneweis."

### Tribal family and K-State family

Dr. Francisco's K-State story is unique. She was born on the Navajo Reservation in a little community called Leupp, Ariz. Her father had been an agricultural extension agent for the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

"I've always been my father's daughter," Dr. Francisco said. "Because he never made it to veterinary school, I decided in my high school years I wanted to be a veterinarian."

Her family had lived on the White Mountain Apache Reservation in Arizona and the Choctaw Indian Reservations in Mississippi. They spent every summer on their own reservation, the Pueblo of Laguna in New Mexico, working cattle, sheep and horses with Dr. Francisco's grandfather.

"My family had always used veterinarians in Albuquerque that had been K-State veterinarians," Dr. Francisco said. "I had wanted to go to Colorado State University like all my friends in undergraduate school [Editor's note: Dr. Francisco earned her bachelor's degree at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces]. My dad convinced me to apply to K-State even though it was not a WICHE [Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education] school, and I'd be paying full out-of-



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state tuition. I was accepted by both schools, so I had to make a decision. For spring break, I flew into Manhattan in the middle of a snow storm where Dean Coffman's wife met me at the airport with one of her son's jackets and a spare pair of snow boots! Dr. Noordsy and Dr. Sam Kruckenberg showed me around the school explaining that at K-State I was not just another student, but part of a huge family. I was hooked! Later that week I went to Ft. Collins, but the feeling was nowhere near what I'd felt at K-State."



Dr. Francisco's decision was soon validated by difficult circumstances.

"On my way to college in August 1986, my dad and I were involved in a very bad automobile accident with a semi truck," Dr. Francisco recalled. "While I was in the hospital, my parents called Dr. Noordsy, and he told them to have me come a year later. They would hold my place for me. I didn't want to do that. When I got out of the hospital, it was two weeks into the semester, but I had my family take me to Manhattan. I had to wear a cervical collar and use a walker to get around, but everyone welcomed me and helped me get going in school. I have such good memories of everyone being so helpful."

#### A role model and a 'Vet Detective'

"As far as I know, there are maybe 15-20 American Indian veterinarians across the U.S.," Dr. Francisco said. "We are still a small minority and those of us from reservations are very small in number. Most of the Indian veterinarians I know do small animal work, but not too many want or like the food and large animal route."

Because Dr. Francisco does work with large animals in connection with tribal lands, she was chosen in 2000 to participate in a unique project produced by the University of Nebraska State Museum and Nebraska 4-H Youth Development through NET Television. The project was called Wonderwise and featured video profiles of nine women in different science disciplines. Dr. Francisco represented her field as the "Vet Detective."

The Wonderwise series offers an educational kit targeted at grades 4-6, which includes a "Vet Detective" video, CD-ROM with additional videos and educational information, and a 48-page activity book. The kits, offered in both English and Spanish, have been used nationwide by schools and 4-H programs.

Joe Turco, manager of television content production and executive producer at NET, said, "Dr. Francisco is an amazing

person, as well as an impressive veterinarian. Producing her profile in New Mexico was an enlightening experience. The mission of Wonderwise was to show the science process in action, and we were able to do this through Dr. Francisco's work with bison and other large animals in the field. She is also a great role model for young women."

"Vet Detective" won several awards including the Cine Golden Eagle award, Best Instructional Media Product from the National Educational Telecommunications Association (NETA), Parents' Choice Approved Award Winner, Golden Aurora Award from the Aurora Awards Film and Video Competition, and an Honorable Mention in the Columbus International Film and Video Festival. More information about "Vet Detective" and the Wonderwise series can be found online at: <http://wonderwise.unl.edu/> and a copy of the DVD is on file in the CVM's Veterinary Medical Library in the Animals in Society Collection, under call number SF 996.36 .F73 v48.

#### Committed to public service

Dr. Francisco's other significant accomplishments include being selected by Agriculture Secretary Ann Venneman in 2000 to be the Native American Liaison for USDA to all tribes in North America and being ranked captain as a Public Health Officer while she was in the Air Force. Part of her job as a Public Health Officer included being in charge of as many as 22 Public Health Technicians and working on many special deployment assignments of the Iraq and Afghanistan theater of operations.

"Now I have aspirations of being an Area Veterinarian in Charge or a Regional Director, so I am currently pursuing a Master of Public Administration degree at the University of Colorado-Denver," Dr. Francisco said. "Someday I still hope to return to my reservation and work with my tribe on all veterinary, agricultural and public health issues. Maybe I can afford to open a small clinic too!" 🐾