Justin Knighten: Hello. I'm Justin Knighten, Director of External Affairs at FEMA. Since 2015, the Resilient Nation Partnership Network has strived to build partnerships that expand capacity and achieve collaborative outcomes. Now, more than ever, investing in partnerships is critical to increasing the nation's resiliency. In April, the network, with support from NOAA released the Building Alliances for Equitable Resilience Resource. This resource is the result of a significant collaboration by 26 partners across the fields of equity and resilience. Together, we inspire communities to advance equitable and resilient practices. The story you're about to hear is from an extraordinary leader who we are honored to call a partner. You will hear from Nikki Cooley of the Diné Nation and the Institute for Tribal Environmental Professionals.

Nikki Cooley: I am of the Towering House Clan, born for the Reed People Clan, my maternal grandfathers are of the Water that Flows Together Clan and paternal grandfathers are of the Manygoats Clan. I am from the earth and sky and of the Diné Nation. I am very fortunate to have grown up on Diné Bikéyah, Navajo land, which is mostly within the boundaries set forth by the US Government. With the majority of the land base in Arizona, there's also land in New Mexico and Utah. I grew up in Shonto and Blue Gap, Arizona, which are small, but vibrant communities. Shonto has a gas station, a K-12 school and a post office. Families largely dependent on livestock and crops tended to carefully and lovingly in the hot arid region. When I was not attending school, my main responsibility was to assist my grandparents and caring for their livestock and crops. I often walked after the sheep and goats as they grazed for miles, sometimes 20 miles round trip from sunrise until sundown.

I accompanied my grandfather through the cornstalks checking for rodents, insects or weeds. I listened to my relatives as they held ceremonies and prayers late into the night or in the early morning, praying for the wellbeing of all living things, including the plants and animals. At my parents' home, I would bring three to five gallon buckets of water into the house from water barrels to use for food, washing and drinking. My father and mother hauled water from windmills most are now dried up as the Navajo Nation never had, and still does not have adequate water infrastructure. From a young age, I inherently knew the value of water, fresh air, organic foods, medicinal, and subsistence animals and plants. I knew the value of harvesting crops and drying them for use in the colder leaner months. No electricity or running water? No problem. I never considered myself poor or unfortunate because I had everything I needed to survive. Water, food, and love.

Now I know I was one of the fortunate ones. As I entered my 41st year of life, I on myself thinking more about how I grew up. Several weekends spent in Shonto during the summer of 2020, allowed me to experience the most unforgiving heat. From growing up, I remember the heat of summers and the cold months of winter, but never the parched air and landscape and relentless heat. Now the landscape is responding by not providing the usual lush greenery for our livestock to fatten up on and watering holes are dried up. This forces us to drive a bit further to fill water tanks. My parents have had to reduce the number of their livestock and condensed their corn fields. The corn does not grow as tall, melons, squash plants are reluctant to sprout and animals such as ravens and rabbits are grown braver and finding ways to bust into the fence field to feast. The rainy seasons do not fill the waterholes and the winter months do not bring the many feet of snow I often trudge through to get to the bus stop.

Life is not only changing, but bringing extreme hardship to a landscape and people that are already struggling to get by. In my professional work with tribes and indigenous communities across the country, including Alaska, I am hearing similar stories. Different landscapes and ecosystems, but the impacts on livelihoods, spiritual and physical wellbeing and traditions echo loudly. I hear the stories of ceremonies and subsistence activities delayed or postponed due to plants not being ready to harvest or animals that have migrated elsewhere following water and food. Elders tell of the unbalance humans have caused to mother earth and father sky. In the Western way we call it climate change. The disruption has certainly caused a delay or halt in the intergenerational sharing and teachings of knowledge and practices. Our work is stewards of the earth and sky has become even more urgent and imperative to the survival of our tribal and indigenous culture and people.

The climate crisis that has and will affect us for years to come has become the focus of many tribal and indigenous people as were often on the forefront of the impacts. Despite being sovereign nations, we are faced with poor or non-existent infrastructures to serve our communities. Despite being sovereign nations, we are often excluded or forgotten when it comes to decision-making processes, funding opportunities and discussions, whether on the national or international stage. Tribal and indigenous people are the first people of this nation survived forced relocations and removals from traditional homelands and are now emerging as leaders in climate change adaptation and mitigation. True long-term partnership and engagement are required and needed. These are a few of the many reasons tribes and indigenous people should always be part of the conversation and not just a check mark to satisfy diversity requirements.

Justin Knighten: Nikki's story represents a unique perspective on the role resiliency plays. Her story reminds us that we are truly in this together because every action moves our country forward to build resilience. We thank Nikki for sharing her story, and we hope it inspires you to move toward meaningful change to make equitable resilience possible for all.