

Yolandra Gomez Toya '88
Bernalillo, NM
Region III Alumni Trustee Candidate

Yolandra Gomez Toya followed a long, winding and atypical road to her current life as a pediatrician, public health advocate, and educator. Through it all, she maintains a belief that education and a focus on family and community are the foundation for bringing positive changes to our society.

Gomez Toya came to Princeton from a rural area in northern New Mexico on the Jicarilla Apache reservation, where she grew up in a large ranching family. She arrived at Princeton knowing that she wanted to be a physician and healer, as her parents, grandparents and great-grandparents had all modeled a similar passion for helping others. During her first year, however, she quickly realized that she was less prepared academically for science courses. She refocused her interests in public health and policy and flourished during her two upper class years in the Woodrow Wilson School (now SPIA).

After graduation she returned home to her reservation to work on a suicide prevention program among Native youth. Her love for learning and education led her to the University of California, Berkeley, and in 1991 she earned an MPH in Health Policy and Administration. She again returned home to New Mexico and for eight years worked with various state agencies, tribes and universities, focusing on such chronic disease issues as obesity and Type 2 diabetes that are prevalent in the Native community.

She never lost sight of her early dream and while working full time took the remaining necessary pre-med courses. In 1999 she was accepted to the University of New Mexico's School of Medicine.

Gomez Toya completed her pediatric residency in 2007, and now practices in private practice in Rio Rancho, New Mexico, where she provides care to a diverse group of patients from many different backgrounds. She also maintains close contact with Native American communities where she serves as an advisor in public health and clinical medicine, including at the tribally run Pueblo of Jemez clinic, where she was the first physician to participate on a family-support team aimed at identifying and helping children with learning and behavioral problems. She continues to do community-based research with tribes, and has presented her work at international conferences with their participation and approval.

In addition to her extensive clinical and advisory work, Gomez Toya is an Assistant Professor at the UNM School of Medicine, "training the next generation of physicians focusing on rural and Native American health." She has also served on the Board of Trustees for her high school, the Colorado Rocky Mountain School, in Carbondale, CO.

Since going back for her 30th Reunion in 2018, Gomez Toya has been dedicated to broadening her service to the University, including increased engagement with Princeton Native alumni and Native American culture. She was the founder and co-leader of the Native Alumni of Princeton affinity group, helping to reach out to over 100 Native

alumni. She was a guest lecturer in the History Department's "Archiving the American West" course, and in the spring of 2022, she will be a guest lecturer in a Medical Anthropology class on "Native Health Disparities and Healing." She has also advised on the creation of the new endowed Professor of Indigenous Studies and sits on the Princeton Art Museum's Advisory Group for Indigenous North America.

Toya believes Princeton's preparation—"the rigors of academic thought, the close student community that allowed me to flourish, the faculty and staff who believed in me"—were invaluable as she navigates her journey, both in a rural, culturally distinct Native community and in the world of public health and medicine.