

Patrick Dunckhorst works with tribal youth.

He's been wearing around his neck a glass, hand-painted journey bead depicting a wave of the ocean, blue skies and then a darkness beneath the wave, which symbolizes life's journey; one that can be turbulent and challenging at times but also calm and peaceful.

Patrick Dunckhorst, a Juvenile Justice Program Specialist within the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, received this bead, which was crafted by a member of the Aleut Community of St. Paul Island, Alaska, after being invited to participate in a 3-week canoe journey with the tribe.

"I never take it off," he says. "It was a complete honor to have been invited on this trip and it's a spiritual reminder of doing something so interactive with Native youth and moving and connected to the earth at the same time. You can't help but be changed by it." Dunckhorst was the only non-native American out of hundreds on this trip.

Dunckhorst has managed programs for tribal youth for the past ten years. He currently manages discretionary grants supporting tribal communities in Alaska, Arizona, California, Montana, Oregon, Oklahoma, North and South Dakota, Mississippi and Minnesota with a strong focus and responsibility for initiatives and programs impacting adjudicated youth; diversion and restorative justice practices; juvenile risk and protective factors; incarcerated youth and aftercare; and juvenile justice systems improvement.

"I absolutely love seeing tribal youth being successful. They remain undaunted in the face of many challenges not affecting the average youth in America; their resilience is admirable," he says. "And while I hope I have had a positive impact on their lives, they clearly have in mine."

He has also learned to work quite well with the tribes.

"It's all about the relationship; it is absolutely paramount," Dunckhorst says. "You need to establish a relationship with the tribes first. We, meaning the non-tribal members, have a tendency to want to get down to business right away. But that's not how (tribes) live and work."

He then adds, "When we meet Native Americans, including Alaska Natives, we tell them our names and where we work. But a Native American will tell you their Indian name, tell you about their parents and their clan and the role and relationship of their clan to the tribe's spirit, strength and community. They really tell you who they are."

Before joining the Department of Justice, Dunckhorst served in the military.

"I was done (working)," Dunckhorst says, after honorably retiring after serving more than 26-years in the Marine Corps as a logistical officer. "I was going to enjoy my time off."

Little did he know his much-wanted retirement was only going to last two years.

A former colleague from the Marines informed him of a job saying, "There's this job over at the Department of Justice and I think you're going to like it." He wasn't too convinced, but Dunckhorst recalls his friend saying, "Just let me send you the job announcement."

"It turns out returning to the workforce at OJJDP was one of the best decisions," he says. "I've really loved every aspect of this position. I couldn't have asked for anything better."