

Teacher's Guide *Becoming Miss Navajo*

Written by Jolyana Begay-Kroupa

Cover by Corey Begay



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About the Book

In *Becoming Miss Navajo*, Jolyana Begay-Kroupa shares her journey from childhood dreams to the responsibilities of serving as Miss Navajo Nation.

The story reveals how the Miss Navajo pageant is not a beauty contest but a celebration of Navajo womanhood, language, and cultural knowledge. The activities in the competition demonstrate how Miss Navajo represents the strength, skill, and intelligence of Diné women. Contestants are evaluated not only for public speaking and poise but also for their ability to conduct themselves with respect and cultural grounding in both English and Navajo. The pageant includes interviews on Navajo history and government, demonstrations of traditional skills such as sheep butchering, breadmaking, and basket weaving, as well as a performance of ceremonial song. Each activity reflects teachings passed down from family and elders, and contestants are expected to explain the meaning behind their actions in Navajo.

The most well-known event, the sheep butchering competition, symbolizes respect for life, food, and the land. Contestants prepare the meat and cook traditional dishes, demonstrating how cultural knowledge is practical and sacred at the same time. Another event, the breadmaking competition, shows patience, discipline, and the joy of sharing food with others. When Jolyana sings her Navajo song “Nooséí,” meaning “younger generation,” she honors the continuity of the language and encourages youth to take pride in their heritage. Even the traditional attire competition is about more than appearance—it expresses the beauty of the Diné worldview through woven patterns, jewelry, and rug dresses, each telling a story about identity and belonging.

Miss Navajo demonstrates her values through these activities, showing that fluency in the Navajo language and knowledge of Diné lifeways are the foundation of true leadership. She is a cultural ambassador who embodies K'é, the web of kinship and respect that binds the Navajo people together. As Jolyana explains, Miss Navajo represents “the essence of the Holy People—First Woman, White Shell Woman, and Changing Woman”—figures who symbolize balance, growth, and renewal. The crown she wears is not a mark of vanity but of service. She travels to communities as a teacher, advocate, and representative of the Navajo Nation, reminding people that beauty is not measured by outward appearance but by fluency, knowledge, and compassion.

Through this story, students learn that the Miss Navajo competition celebrates the deep connection between language, culture, and identity. It teaches that true beauty lies in knowing who you are, where you come from, and how to carry your teachings forward. By showing mastery of both traditional and modern skills, Miss Navajo demonstrates that cultural knowledge is alive, evolving, and powerful. Jolyana Begay-Kroupa’s journey inspires young readers to see that language and heritage are inseparable, and that pride in one’s identity is the highest form of achievement.

3-Day Grade 6 Unit Plan: “Leadership and Language – The Legacy of Miss Navajo Nation”

Arizona Social Studies Standards – Grade 6 Alignment

- SS06.G1.1 – Explain how cultural practices reflect beliefs and values of a community.
- SS06.C1.1 – Describe civic virtues and roles of citizens and leaders in various communities.
- SS06.H1.1 – Use primary and secondary sources to investigate historical events and individuals.
- SS06.SP3.1 – Construct and present explanations of continuity and change over time.

Day 1 – Cultural Identity and the Meaning of Miss Navajo

Objective (SWBAT):

Students will explain why the Miss Navajo Nation pageant is a cultural event rather than a beauty contest and identify how it teaches the values of Diné womanhood.

Activities

1. Read Aloud & Discussion: Read “What Is Miss Navajo?” and “Grandma Lucy” from *Becoming Miss Navajo*.
Discuss the pageant’s categories – language, traditional skills, and public speaking.
2. Teacher Mini-Lecture: Show historical photos of past Miss Navajo winners.
Discuss how the role of Miss Navajo began in 1952 with Dr. Beulah Melvin Allen, who represented education, service, and community health.
3. Pair Activity: Students list what qualities define a leader in Diné culture and compare them with qualities expected of Miss Navajo.

Writing Task:

Students write a paragraph explaining how Jolyana’s grandmother Lucy influenced her journey and why family teachings are essential to cultural leadership.

Assessment:

Exit ticket – students complete the prompt:
“Miss Navajo is not a beauty pageant because ...”

Day 2 – Language, Tradition, and Leadership

Objective (SWBAT):

Students will describe how Navajo language, ceremony, and traditional knowledge demonstrate leadership and identity in the Miss Navajo Nation competition.

Activities

1. Close Reading: Examine the sections “Sheep Butchering and Breadmaking” and “Nooséí Song.”
Discuss how each event teaches respect, skill, and spiritual balance (hózhó).
2. Biography Connection: Read the short biography of Radmilla Cody, 1997 Miss Navajo, who combined traditional music with modern styles.
Compare how both women use language and song to teach culture.
3. Group Discussion: How does knowing the Navajo language make someone a better leader?

Writing Task:

Students compose a short reflection titled “My Language, My Power,” explaining how learning or speaking Navajo connects them to their family and community.

Assessment:

Students share one sentence aloud that expresses how language builds leadership.

Day 3 – Continuity, Change, and Representation

Objective (SWBAT):

Students will analyze how the role of Miss Navajo Nation has changed over time and what it reveals about Navajo women’s leadership today.

Activities

1. Timeline Study: Review Miss Navajo Biographies (1952–2026) focusing on Dr. Beulah Melvin Allen, Sunny Dooley, Radmilla Cody, Jolyana Begay-Kroupa, and Crystalne Curley. Students highlight what each woman contributed—education, storytelling, activism, or political leadership.
2. Class Chart: “Then and Now – The Changing Role of Miss Navajo.” Identify what traditions have remained (language, service) and what has evolved (education, political leadership).
3. Culminating Activity: View a short video of a recent Miss Navajo competition. Discuss how the values of K’é and hózhó appear in the contestants’ speeches and actions.

Writing Task (Culminating Essay):

Students write a one-page essay titled “The Legacy of Miss Navajo.”

They explain how the Miss Navajo Nation pageant connects past, present, and future Navajo leadership, citing at least one passage from *Becoming Miss Navajo* and one biography.

Assessment:

Essays are scored on comprehension of text, use of Navajo cultural vocabulary, and explanation of continuity and change.

Teacher Resources for the Unit

- Begay-Kroupa, J. (2022). *Becoming Miss Navajo*. Salina Bookshelf.
- Navajo Nation Fair Archives – Miss Navajo Pageant videos and photo galleries.
- Miss Navajo Nation Biographies (1952–2026).
- Cody, R. (2000). *Within the Four Directions* (album).
- Dooley, S. (1999). *Mai and the Cliff-Dwelling Birds*. Kiva Publishing.

This unit plan helps grade 6 Navajo students see leadership and service as extensions of cultural knowledge and language fluency. Through reading, writing, and discussion, students connect their own voices to the legacy of Miss Navajo Nation—affirming that Diné Bizaad and K'é remain central to who they are and who they will become.

Resources for Teachers:

Becoming Miss Navajo by Jolyana Begay-Kroupa (Salina Bookshelf, 2023) – A first-person narrative of preparing for and winning Miss Navajo Nation, richly describing cultural knowledge, family teachings, and responsibilities.

Songs from the Loom: A Navajo Girl Learns to Weave by Monty Roessel – A story highlighting Navajo traditions, family teachings, and cultural pride.

Celebrate the Navajo Nation Fair – Teacher-created packets and children's nonfiction, available through the Navajo Nation Museum gift shop and Navajo Times archives.

The Miss Navajo Nation Pageant: A Cultural Celebration – Booklets distributed by the Navajo Nation Museum during the fair.

Weaving a World: Textiles and the Navajo Way of Seeing by Roseann S. Willink and Paul G. Zolbrod – Teacher background on Navajo weaving traditions, relevant to rug dress and basketry.

Online Resources:

Navajo Nation Fair Official Site – navajonationfair.com (schedule, history, and resources).

Navajo Nation Museum – navajonationmuseum.org (resources on the pageant, Miss Navajo oral histories, cultural activities).

Navajo Times – navajotimes.com (coverage of Miss Navajo Nation contestants, winners, and the Fair).

Phoenix Indian Center – phxindcenter.org (features Jolyana Begay-Kroupa’s language work; useful for connecting her biography to current initiatives).

Smithsonian NMAI – americanindian.si.edu (educator resources on Indigenous pageantry, language revitalization, and cultural heritage).

Video & Film Resources:

Miss Navajo (PBS/Independent Lens, 2007, directed by Billy Luther) – Documentary film following contestants; available on PBS LearningMedia with teacher guides.

Miss Navajo Nation YouTube Channel – Clips of pageant events, speeches, and cultural demonstrations.

Navajo Nation Fair Parade – Livestreamed on YouTube and Facebook; excellent classroom visual material.

Navajo Nation Government Channel (NTU Channel 5/Vimeo) – Recordings of Miss Navajo Pageant and cultural activities.

Miss Navajo Nation Biographies (1952–2026)

Dr. Beulah Melvin Allen (First Miss Navajo, 1952) Dr. Beulah Margaret Melvin Allen was crowned the very first Miss Navajo Nation in 1952, when the Fair’s audience applauded to pick the winner. Born in 1937, she grew up in Fort Defiance, Arizona, where her mother worked as a nurse. At the time, Miss Navajo was not a beauty pageant, but a celebration of cultural representation, Navajo womanhood, and leadership. After her reign, Dr. Allen pursued higher education with determination. She studied at Barnard College, Arizona State College, and later earned her medical degree. She dedicated her life to medicine, becoming a physician and helping bring better health care services to the Navajo Nation. Her life shows how Miss Navajo has always been about service, strength, and commitment to her people.

Charlotte Lawrence Greenstone (1954–1956) Charlotte Lawrence Greenstone became famous for being the only Miss Navajo to reign three consecutive years (1954, 1955, 1956). During this era, the pageant was smaller, and audience applause often determined the winner. Her repeated victories reflected the community’s admiration and support. Her time as Miss Navajo illustrates how the role was evolving in the 1950s—less formal than today’s multi-day competitions, but still rooted in representing Navajo culture, family teachings, and dignity. Charlotte’s story reminds us that Miss Navajo has always carried the responsibility of embodying Navajo womanhood.

Sunny Dooley (1982–1983) Sunny Dooley, from Chi Chil’ Tah, New Mexico, was crowned Miss Navajo Nation in 1982. Growing up with Navajo as her first language, she brought the strength of storytelling to her reign. She retold traditional Diné stories, including those of Changing Woman, as part of her competition. After her title year, Sunny became well known as a professional Navajo storyteller. She has performed across the U.S., taught in schools, and worked with cultural institutions. Her published children’s book *Mai and the Cliff-Dwelling Birds* is one example of her efforts to preserve Navajo storytelling. Her life shows how Miss Navajo can launch a lifelong career in cultural work.

Radmilla A. Cody (1997–1998) Radmilla Cody, raised by her grandmother, was crowned Miss Navajo Nation in 1997. She became the first biracial Miss Navajo (Navajo and African American heritage), which led to important conversations in Navajo society about identity and belonging. Following her reign, Radmilla became a celebrated singer, blending traditional Navajo songs with contemporary styles. She has also been a strong advocate against domestic violence, using her platform to raise awareness and provide support to others. Her path demonstrates the diversity of Miss Navajo winners and the many ways they serve their people.

Jolyana Begay-Kroupa (2001–2002) Jolyana Begay-Kroupa, originally from Ts'ikdiilyesiitah (Rabbitbrush) near Fort Defiance, AZ, served as the 50th Miss Navajo Nation (2001–2002). She was inspired by her grandmother Lucy, who raised her with Navajo language and teachings. In her preparation for the pageant, she learned butchering, breadmaking, basket weaving, and public speaking in Navajo and English. During her reign, Jolyana emphasized that Miss Navajo is not a beauty pageant, but a cultural ambassadorship—demonstrating Navajo knowledge, traditions, and language. Afterward, she pursued a career in education and language revitalization. Today, she teaches Navajo language at universities and directs programs at the Phoenix Indian Center. Her book *Becoming Miss Navajo* tells her journey in her own words, making her story accessible for students and teachers alike.

Crystalyne Curley (2011–2012) From Fish Point, Arizona, Crystalyne Curley served as Miss Navajo in 2011–12. During her pageant preparation and reign, she focused on Navajo language and cultural pride. She showed that Miss Navajo is about knowledge, leadership, and service. After her reign, Curley entered public service and became a political leader. In 2023, she made history as the first woman elected Speaker of the Navajo Nation Council. Her journey shows how Miss Navajo can be a training ground for leadership roles in government and community.

Leandra “Abby” Thomas (2012–2013) Leandra Thomas of Steamboat Canyon, Arizona, was crowned Miss Navajo in 2012. She excelled in the traditional skill competitions, earning awards for butchering and traditional talent. Her bilingual speech in Navajo and English impressed audiences and elders alike. Later, she pursued higher education in bilingual multicultural education, with the goal of strengthening Navajo language programs for children. Her platform emphasized connecting elders and youth, ensuring the cultural teachings of one generation are passed to the next.

McKeon Kova Dempsey (2014–2015) From Oak Springs, Arizona, McKeon Dempsey became Miss Navajo in 2014. She used her platform to highlight art and storytelling as powerful tools for healing and self-expression. She often spoke about supporting youth through creativity and traditional teachings. She went on to earn a Bachelor of Fine Arts at the Institute of American Indian Arts and pursued graduate study in art therapy. Her story shows how Miss Navajo winners adapt their cultural knowledge to serve the needs of modern Navajo youth.

Autumn J. Montoya (2018–2019) Autumn Montoya of Torreon, New Mexico, won the crown in 2018, becoming one of the first Eastern Agency representatives in recent memory to hold the title. Her win highlighted the diversity of dialects, communities, and traditions within the Navajo Nation. Her reign emphasized pride in her home community, cultural ambassadorship, and participation in traditional food and skill competitions. She showed that Miss Navajo continues to unite the Nation while honoring local traditions.

Shaandiin P. Parrish (2019–2021) Shaandiin Parrish of Kayenta, Arizona, reigned for two years because of the COVID-19 pandemic. A graduate of Arizona State University, she brought her background in political science and education to the role. During the pandemic, she led relief efforts, helping distribute food and water to families. She often reminded people that leadership is about service. Her reign highlighted how Miss Navajo can adapt to modern challenges while holding to traditional values.

Niagara A.C. Rockbridge (2021–2022) From Piñon, Arizona, Niagara Rockbridge came into the pageant with previous titles like Miss Indian Arizona and Miss Teen Navajo. She excelled in traditional skills, winning Best Butcher and Best Traditional Food. Her reign emphasized cultural responsibility, humility, and service. She often spoke about how the crown was not only an honor but also a responsibility to embody Navajo womanhood and represent her people faithfully.

Ranisha C. Begay (2024–2025) Ranisha Chrislyn Begay of Rock Point, Arizona, was crowned Miss Navajo Nation in 2024. She focused her year on cultural preservation and storytelling. She traveled widely, meeting with elders and encouraging youth to learn their language and family stories. She explained that intergenerational storytelling is what keeps the Navajo identity alive.

Camille Jane Uentillie (2025–2026) Camille Uentillie of Kinlichee, Arizona, was crowned Miss Navajo in 2025. She is Tsi'naajinii, born for Tł'ááshch'í, with maternal and paternal grandfathers from Tó'áhání and Tó Dík'ózhí. Her goals include youth engagement and language revitalization. She has said that helping young Navajos reconnect to their heritage and strengthening community programs are her priorities for her reign.