Randella Sasha Hardy took a chance when she decided to leave the familiarity of Magdalena, N.M., to attend Stanford University in Palo Alto, Calif. Originally from Phoenix, her family moved to Magdalena when Hardy was entering the sixth grade, and she found the small, remote town with its mountains and dirt roads a welcome change from the crowds of the city.

Her class at Magdalena High School had fewer than 30 students, and there weren’t many AP and college prep classes available. Still, Hardy was determined to challenge herself and pursue an education out of state, so she reached out to her counselor and teachers who helped her identify universities that fit her personal preferences.

Like many students, she started college enrolled in a program she had chosen because of a general interest — hers in the health of the environment. At Stanford she discovered that she had made the right choice. Now in her final year of Stanford’s Earth Systems program, an interdisciplinary environmental sciences major, she has settled comfortably in the Oceans track, a decision made after studying in Hawaii. “After being able to go snorkeling and conduct marine transects through taking courses like Ecology of Hawaiian Islands and Heritage, Environment, and Sovereignty in Hawaii, I immediately became interested in the ocean and the relationship between the physical and biological aspects,” she says. “I also did a group project while on the trip, involving policies and enforcement of marine protected areas.”

In the summer of 2012, she participated in the Coastal Margin Observation and Prediction (CMOP) summer internship program, where she researched the impact of the Columbia River Treaty on the habitat of salmon and lamprey. The experience taught her about graduate school possibilities and gave her an opportunity to work independently while contributing to a team, and learn about computer programming and scientific data analysis.

But studying away from home has not been without its challenges, especially for someone so close to her family. She dealt with bouts of homesickness, and at times struggled to balance her academic work. A resilient student, she sought out solutions to her problems using what was available to her, particularly to manage her academics.

“There are so many resources readily available in different subjects,” she says. “It’s just a matter of taking the initiative to make appointments and receive this assistance. There are always people willing to help.”

To deal with her homesickness, she confided in people she was comfortable with — counselors at her school’s health center, family, and friends, many of whom she has found in on-campus groups within the Native community. Through them, she has found other students she can relate to culturally and academically. “AISES has given me the opportunity to attend tutoring sessions as well as meet with representatives from large-scale technology companies like Google,” she says.

After graduation, she hopes to help conserve the coastal environment, and to explore all avenues to improve current conditions. Eventually, she would like to work on the Navajo Reservation doing environmental consulting or research. “I want to give back to the community that has given me so much value in my life,” she says.

Based on her own experience Hardy is ready to offer advice to other students who might be having a hard time in college. “There are always bumps along the way,” she says. “You may feel lost or buried in work at times, but it’s normal — recognize that you need some extra help and seek out the necessary individuals because they are there to give you the ample attention you need.”

— Urey Onuoha