Two years ago, Clara Sue Kidwell was in the midst of building one of the world's great museums, a project that could have become her life's work. Instead, she chose to come home and dedicate her life to building bridges between different worlds.

Kidwell, an OU alumna and native of Muskogee, was serving as assistant director of cultural resources for the Smithsonian Institution's future National Museum of the American Indian when she was asked to return to her alma mater as the first director of the OU Native American Studies Program.

Since returning to Oklahoma last year, Kidwell's energies have been devoted to bridging cultures and building a strong relationship between OU and Native Americans throughout the nation.

"If there is a place where there ought to be a center for Native American studies, it should be the University of Oklahoma," says Kidwell, a member of the Choctaw and Chippewa tribes. "This is an opportunity to work with communities in a form of outreach that is very important."

Outreach can take many forms. For instance, several Native American students under Kidwell's direction currently are participating in the first state research project to track immunization among Native American children.

Outreach also can mean simply bringing people together to talk—one goal of Kidwell's dream project, the proposed Center for American Indian Cultures. The project, which she likens to a "Carl Albert Center" for Indian research, would bring all of OU's Native American resources together to coordinate academic offerings, Native American cultural events, performances and symposia for the public.

"It's not just the building, it's what you put in the building," she insists. "The center will offer a range of activities that really will put OU on the map as a place where scholarship on Indian issues takes place. It may be a kind of window into Indian cultures."

Kidwell hopes to base the center's academic programs on the interdisciplinary, liberal arts model of OU's letters curriculum. The program essentially would focus on learning how to learn, rather than learning about being Native American.

"Indian students learn to be Indian in their own communities; it's not something we can teach them at the University," she says.

"I want to teach our students how to learn about different ways of learning. They have to understand where all the forces that impinge on Indians are coming from. Understanding a different way of thinking about things is important. We need to be able to build bridges, translate the information to an Indian frame of reference and bring it back to Indian communities."

Indian communities also will continue to benefit from OU's Native American languages program, which with Choctaw, Cherokee, Creek and Kiowa offers more Indian languages than any other program in the world. In addition, the program serves as a repository for audio tapes of tribal elders who may be among the last living people speaking their native language.

"Oklahoma has an incredibly complex variety of tribal experiences," Kidwell says. "There is a richness of language in this state, yet there is the tragedy that those languages that do exist are essentially dying or have died. Currently, there's no way to revive them as a working language in the tribal communities. But if there's any way these languages can ever be brought back, the University will have resources to offer to communities."

Such resources are valuable to people from all backgrounds, Kidwell explains. "Language is a form of culture. I hope that our language classes can help non-Native
A nationally respected Native American scholar, Clara Sue Kidwell left a promising career with the Smithsonian Institution to return to her alma mater. Kidwell is shown here by the Allan Houser statue, "The Drummer," on the Bizzell Library plaza.

American students see some of the differences and similarities between us and learn more about Indian cultures."

It took a certain amount of distance for Kidwell to learn about her own culture. She had been away from Oklahoma for several years and was teaching Native American students at Haskell Junior College in Kansas when she realized the depth of her own experience as a Native American.

Both of Kidwell's parents worked for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and her grandmother—a Choctaw educated by missionaries—lived with the family during Kidwell's childhood.

"She was a very stubborn and determined woman, the matriarch of the house," Kidwell recalls. "At Haskell, I began to realize that the values system my grandmother had passed on to me was very similar to that of the students and colleagues I was dealing with."

"It was a roundabout realization," she says. "I never really felt like I fit in during high school or even at OU. The Haskell experience was really crucial in understanding what my grandmother and my parents were passing on to me."

Kidwell hopes to help other Native American students come to terms with their own culture and their future through the Native American Studies Program, first offered in 1994. Enrollment indicates that students find value in the program's courses in language, history, anthropology, literature, fine arts and contemporary issues. This year, eight students graduated from the program, and another 47 students currently have majors or minors in Native American studies.

"I think we will only continue to grow significantly," Kidwell predicts.

One of the country's most prominent Native American scholars admits that her academic career began almost by happenstance. In the early 1960s, she was a letters major with no clear job future and a student employee in the late Duane H. D. Roller's Faculty Research Office.

"I had no notable job skills except for the ability to type really fast," says Kidwell, explaining that she had taken several of Roller's history of science courses purely out of curiosity and respect for her employer. Roller found her to be an excellent student and encouraged her to apply for a fellowship provided through the National Defense Education Act.

Kidwell soon found herself a graduate student in OU's highly respected history of science program. She earned a master's in history of science in 1966 and a doctoral degree in 1970.

While conducting research on science and Native American cultures, she became engrossed in the study of Native Americans. She was appointed chair of the ethnic studies department at the University of California at Berkeley and also taught about American Indian medicine in the University of Minnesota's American Indian Studies Department. Along the way, Kidwell wrote several books on Native American history and culture and earned such prestigious awards as a National Endowment for the Humanities grant and fellowships from the Smithsonian and the Rockefeller Foundation.

Such experience gave Kidwell a broad background to serve as a primary planner for the Smithsonian's new Native American museum, which will bring together more than 1.1 million artifacts relating to Native American culture and history in the last open slot on the mall in Washington, D.C.

Kidwell referred to her time with the Smithsonian as "one of the high points of my professional career." However, major political shifts in Congress soon fostered a feeling of uncertainty as museum planners came to believe much of their funding might be jeopardized.

Then Kidwell received the phone call that would bring her home.

"I felt a very strong pull back to Oklahoma," she says. "My family is here. I was given a chance to build a program at the University. All of these things conspired to bring me back to Oklahoma."

—Anne Barajas