

Lt. Justin Townsend receives 2024 Society of American Indian Government Employees Award

By Keisha Reynolds, MyCG Writer

It's seldom you meet a person who practices what they preach. Lt. Justin Townsend is such a person — committed to sharing and educating others about his American Indian culture while “walking the walk” as an active role model for our youth.

That's why Townsend has been awarded the 2024 Society of American Indian Government Employees (SAIGE) award at a ceremony in Spokane, Wash. The SAIGE Military Meritorious Award recognizes those who serve in uniform (or have previously served) who have contributed beyond the mission while promoting American Indian and/or Alaskan Native culture.

Townsend, who also is a proud member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, certainly meets the criterion — at-work and in his spare time. Townsend assumed the duties of Executive Officer of the Coast Guard's Cryptologic Unit in Colorado in June of 2021 while serving as Deputy Chief of a joint service mission at National Security Agency/Central Security Service (NSA/CSS) Colorado (NSAC), which includes civilians, military and contract workers. On top of his role in the agency, he also volunteered to lead NSAC's American Indian/Alaska Native Employee Resource Group, serving more than 1,000 joint military members and civilians.

The caliber of Townsend's work is clear; he was among a team of intelligence professionals that received a White House Award for a new and sophisticated intelligence collection project in support of international efforts against illegal and unreported fishing practices.

Beyond these roles, Townsend is also a member of SAIGE. Townsend recently spearheaded a joint Coast Guard and NSAC celebration of National American Indian Heritage Month at the Aerospace Data Facility in Colorado. Townsend presented on the many tribes involved in the Code Talker programs — and their success — during World Wars I and II. Townsend also invited indigenous representatives from various tribal nations to perform a traditional powwow dance for attendees.

“To see thousands of employees here and it was National American Indian Heritage Month. It was a proud moment to be an American Indian. I am working in the American government and being able to

positively portray our culture to people who may or may not have experienced it — it was a really proud moment,” said Townsend.

Townsend’s off-hour interests include podcasting and serving as the chief executive officer and founder of Harvesting Nature, an outdoor education company that teaches people how to gather, prepare, and consume wild food. His passion for hunting, fishing, and foraging is connected to his upbringing in Southeastern Oklahoma. It is built on the foundation of fond memories of fishing trips with his grandfather and cooking deer meat with his grandmother.

There’s no shortage of activity in Townsend’s free time. He plays rugby for a local club, coaches youth rugby, and was selected to play on the Coast Guard’s Rugby team in 2023. He frequently mentors high school students and enlisted military members. He also volunteers with Denver Health as a firearm advocate for suicide prevention and distributes suicide prevention materials to local gun stores.

Townsend graduated from the University of New Orleans in 2010 with a bachelor’s degree in anthropology and geography. He earned his commission from the Coast Guard’s Officer Candidate School in 2016.

Townsend says of the honor, “I am most proud of the work. It was recognizing the needs in my community that was the big driver behind what I was doing. I think it’s cool and I am proud to be the recipient of this award.”

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