What does it mean to be first generation to college?
Growing up in the small, rural town of Madera, California, Kristina Ortez de Jones had little help and few models to follow for her college aspirations. Her brother, older than she by seven years, was the first person from her "entire extended family, both sides" to go to college. Kristina won a scholarship to Harvard College, and was one of only three students from her class to choose private universities. "We kept in touch throughout college," Kristina recalls. "I needed a voice from home."

Kristina’s experience is not so different from that of many Taos students who are the first of their families to attend college. The challenges start early, with high school preparation and before. Studies show that fewer first generation students take advanced math courses or other important prerequisites. They attend college in fewer numbers than their peers whose parents attended post-secondary school, and their college graduation rate is significantly lower. A 2018 report from the National Center for Education Statistics explains that, when first generation students do enroll, they "cannot benefit from their parents’ college-going experience—a valuable source of cultural capital that helps students navigate college." Often, first-generation students must juggle pressing financial or family concerns, factors that may interfere with their ability to enroll full time and attend continuously. They face other challenges, as well. "I felt very lonely," Kristina recalls. It took her some time to feel that she belonged.

For Taos students, she says, "the fact that Bridges exists is so amazing." Its value extends beyond just opening doors to college. For first generation students, in particular, Bridges Project offers help in "thinking through [and] expressing your experience growing up in a place like Taos—how you navigate that, and how you prepare yourself for the next phase. I didn’t have that," Kristina says. "I think it’s so valuable."

"College is just the beginning," Kristina advises. Where life leads after that is a grand adventure. For first generation students, having an ally like Bridges can be crucial to the path.
"It's okay to maintain your connection to your [home] community while you're in college. It's good; it's normal. But finding community where you are—that's critical."

"This is what I wish someone had told me: You will be uncomfortable. You will be tested. Your role is not to explain yourself to others."

"When you're away at school, it's the time to try new things. To take risks and make mistakes."

"Give yourself a break! I was so serious."

"I think these schools need more voices like ours."

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The mission of Bridges Project for Education is to expand college access for people of all ages, with an emphasis on students who are the first generation in their families to seek higher education.
"College is just the beginning," Kristina advises. "My path took me in a completely different direction, not at all what I thought I would do." And that, she says, is just fine.

Kristina describes the community where she was raised as having "a real cultural divide between those in power and those who did the work. As a Chicana/Latina, I didn't grow up thinking that my place was at the table." She entered college with family support, but without the solid example of parents who were familiar with the process and experience. Consequently, she says, she "spent a lot of energy thinking about what I was going to do next, and not a lot of energy thinking about what I was doing at the moment." She thinks that's a common mistake—and one that's easy to forgive. "It's really hard to know who you are at 17 or 18," she allows, with a smile.

"I didn't know how my life would turn out when I finished college," Kristina says. She's got a lesson to impart: "It's okay not to know. It is wonderful just to be where you are."

At college, she says, "the most important thing I learned was how to write in a voice that was my own." Since she found that voice, she has not stopped using it—most strongly, to advocate for the environment. After much exploration and self-reflection, she's settled into a job she loves: Executive Director for the Taos Land Trust. The photo with the autumn leaves? That's Kristina with land trust consultant, Andy Robinson, enjoying a fall hike on the soon-to-be new home of Taos Land Trust. Kristina takes her inspiration from the natural world, and urges students to be like an oak tree: strongly rooted in your home community, but "willing to let your branches swirl in the maelstrom."

Bridges Project for Education welcomes all interested students, regardless of background, age, academic standing, family circumstance or postsecondary choice.