

COMING FULL CIRCLE

Navajo ministry team directs relief efforts at home

By Elizabeth Hardin-Burrola

Independent correspondent
religion@gallupindependent.com

GALLUP — With the rise of COVID-19 cases on the Navajo Nation, the mission of the Navajo Nation Christian Response Team has come full circle.

The team, known by its acronym NNCRT, was founded several years ago in response to the need for volunteers to help hurricane victims in Texas, according to team member Kevin Ruthven, the chaplain at Rehoboth Christian School.

“A lot of Navajo families were impacted by those hurricanes,” Ruthven said in an interview Thursday. As a result, he said, the team mobilized a group of volunteers to travel to Texas.

In the years since, the team has traveled to other communities to offer assistance, Ruthven said.

But now, with COVID-19’s huge impact on the Navajo Nation, the NNCRT is directing all of its relief efforts at home. For the last couple of weeks, the group has been receiving truckloads – and plane loads – of donated food and cleaning products from various Christian organizations and churches and working to distribute

See Coming full circle, Page 5

Francine Salazar, left, a volunteer coordinator for the Navajo Nation Christian Response Team, provides gloves to volunteers outside the old Rehoboth Christian School gym Thursday. Volunteers from local churches have been coming to the gym to unload truckloads of donated food and supplies and to pack relief boxes for families on the Navajo Nation.

Elizabeth Hardin-Burrola/Independent



Volunteers from local churches help pack relief boxes with donated food and supplies in the old Rehoboth Christian School gym Thursday. The Navajo Nation Christian Response Team is spearheading the relief effort.

Elizabeth Hardin-Burrola/Independent



Coming full circle

Continued from Page 1

those emergency supplies to Navajo families.

Assistance focus

Ruthven was interviewed at the old Rehoboth gym, which the NNCRT is using as a decontamination and distribution site. While he spoke, a few dozen volunteers from area churches packed boxes full of relief supplies.

“Everything that comes in here has been decontaminated,” Ruthven said, explaining all incoming donations are decontaminated before being repacked by volunteers and distributed to Navajo families. “Safety is our number one concern.”

According to Ruthven, the NNCRT’s focus is to provide relief supplies to four primary groups: Navajo elders, individuals with underlying medical conditions, the families of Navajo Nation first responders, and single parent families.

Ruthven said the team is working with Christian pastors on the reservation, as well as Navajo community health representatives, to identify families needing aid.

“We don’t want to just duplicate what other people are doing,” Ruthven said, noting that some parts of the Navajo Nation are getting good relief assistance.

Volunteerism and generosity

Ruthven expressed appreciation for the support the NNCRT’s relief work was getting from various Christian organizations, churches, and local volunteers from different denominations.

“It’s so cool to see so many people wanting to help,” he said, citing the volunteerism and generosity in the local community.

Ruthven said one of the positive aspects to the current situation is how area families are pulling together and supporting each other. He noted the example of one of his Rehoboth students who told him the stay-at-home orders were causing the student’s family to grow closer, and the situation was creating opportunities for the student to spend more time with their grandparents on the reservation and listening to their stories.

“We’re hearing that from a lot of people,” he said.

Ross and Spearman said life in Tucson is fairly normal compared to what they have seen since arriving here. Spearman said he doubted many people in Tucson realize the number of other Arizona residents – like those on the Navajo Nation – who live without running water.

Helmuth noted that while other people are being negatively impacted by COVID-19, particularly those who are laid off from work, families on the Navajo Nation who were already dealing with poverty and the lack of running water have been hit harder.

“Life is just more difficult with the pandemic,” he said.

Responsibility and honor

Gallup resident Francine Salazar recently volunteered to help the Navajo Nation Christian Response Team after receiving an email requesting help last week. Soon she was serving as a volunteer coordinator for the group, she said.

“As a Christian, I believe we have a responsibility and honor to help people meet their needs at this time,” Salazar said, while taking a brief break from packing relief boxes.

A member of the Gila River Indian Community on her father’s side and Navajo on her mother’s side, Salazar said she understands how important relief boxes are to some reservation families, particularly those who may not be able to drive and obtain needed groceries and supplies.

Salazar was accompanied by her sons Nick, a student at Grand Canyon University, and Joshua, a senior at Miyamura High School. Salazar said volunteering is an important value to her family, as is the idea of trying to live a selfless life.

“I’m so happy to be a part of this,” Salazar said, noting the NNCRT volunteers come from many different area churches.

“The common goal is to serve those who don’t have the means to help their families at this time,” she said.

Information:

Navajo Nation Christian Response Team,
nncrtstaff@gmail.com, Ty Platero at 505-979-0341 or
Kevin Ruthven at 505-870-2382

On the flip side, Ruthven said organizers are aware of the stress area families are under with the coronavirus pandemic, and they have heard reports of rising numbers of domestic violence and suicide.

Ruthven said stressful times like these do cause people to seek spiritual answers, and he referred to a quote by famed author C.S. Lewis: “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”

Up-close perspective

Justin Ross, Clint Spearman and Brian Helmuth are airplane pilots from Arizona who are getting an up-close perspective of the current challenges facing families on the Navajo Nation as they volunteer to help the NNCRT.

Ross, of Tucson, is the president of Wings of the Way, a nonprofit aviation ministry. He also works with UIM Aviation. Spearman, also of Tucson, flies with Ross at Wings of the Way and UIM Aviation. Helmuth, of Phoenix, flies for Ethnos360, formerly New Tribes Mission.

The pilots, who arrived April 14, have flown a few flights delivering relief supplies in their Cessna 206, but they have also been serving as volunteers on the ground.

“Most of our work here has been coordinating logistics,” Ross said of the pilots’ volunteer work.



Francine Salazar, a volunteer coordinator for the Navajo Nation Christian Response Team, gives directions to volunteers helping pack relief boxes for families on the Navajo Nation at the old gym at Rehoboth Christian School Thursday. Behind Salazar are Rob McIntosh, a local pastor who serves as a safety coordinator, and Annika Rogers, a teacher who volunteers as a supply coordinator.

Elizabeth Hardin-Burrola/Independent



Clint Spearman and Justin Ross, pilots with the Wings of the Way aviation ministry, load donated relief supplies in their Cessna 206 at the Gallup Municipal Airport Sunday. The pilots are helping the Navajo Nation Christian Response Team.

Courtesy Photo