‘It just feels like they’re forgotten’: Navajo women mobilize to protect elders from COVID-19

By Katelyn Reinhart/Cronkite News
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Two Navajo elders wear face masks to protect them from COVID-19. Defend Our Community is a grassroots group delivering supplies to elders in need. Volunteers have helped more than 100 people to date. (Photo by grandriver/Getty Images)

Editor’s Note: Coronavirus has devastated Native American communities and put a spotlight on some long-standing problems in Indian Country that have made this pandemic that much worse. But at the grassroots level, everyday heroes have stepped up to help. One in a series.

SCOTTSDALE – Indigenous tribes have their own cultures, languages and customs, but two common threads run through them – high esteem for their elders, and the heavy impact COVID-19 has had on Native communities.

Disparities in elder income, health and overall wellness were not brought on by COVID-19, but the pandemic has shone an unforgiving light on some of the issues elders face.

From Navajos in remote towns like tiny Leupp to the president of the tribal nation, the mission has been clear: Protect the elders.
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But too often, they also need the most aid.

The National Indian Council on Aging reports that twice as many American Indian and Alaska Native elders live below the poverty line compared with the general U.S. population. And 10% of older American Indians need help eating as opposed to 3% of the general population.

In 2017, almost half of older American Indian and Alaska Natives had at least one disability, according to the Administration for Community Living.

Laura Schad, a member of South Dakota’s Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe and program information coordinator for Partnership With Native Americans, said in an email that these obstacles may make it more difficult to follow safety guidelines related to the pandemic.

“Many elders live in multigenerational households, challenging social distancing recommendations,” Schad said. “Some elders, especially Navajo, live independently in traditional homes. Those lack running water and common utilities ... and this, again, complicates the CDC recommendations of frequent handwashing.”

In part because of these income and health disparities, COVID-19 has hit Native American communities hard. As of Aug. 11, the Navajo Department of Health had reported more than 9,000 cases and more than 470 deaths on the Navajo Nation Reservation.

President Jonathan Nez has been urging Navajos to come together to take care of elders during the pandemic.

“I challenge the Navajo people: Let’s protect them by staying home,” he said during a virtual town hall on June 9. “It’s our responsibility as family members. ... I’ve seen some elders, tears running down their face, saying, ‘My kids don’t visit me.’”

The sentiment was echoed by Vice President Myron Lizer, who said that supporting elders during the pandemic and well beyond is beneficial for all. “Love for our elders means we all win,” he said.
Looking out for family

The leaders of Defend Our Community have been both heartened and haunted by the elders they’ve met.

During one delivery, Whitehair and Slowtalker approached a trailer home and called out for the man who lived there but got no answer. They found him lying on the ground between some cinder blocks.

Because diabetic ulcers had destroyed the feeling in his feet, the elder had stumbled and couldn’t get up on his own.

Whitehair and Slowtalker got him out of the 102 degree heat, then called his relatives to see whether someone could check on him after they’d left. No one called back.

“It turned up more of an angry side,” Slowtalker recalled. “How can we treat our elders like this? All of these things are running through my head like why, why, why, why, and I didn’t have the answers.”

Members of Defend Our Community, along with some other elders, have taken to keeping watch on the man.

Not all trips are met with sadness. Other deliveries have connected Whitehair, Harvey and Slowtalker with distant family members and helped them forge new bonds.

“At the end of the day,” Harvey said, “we approach as strangers with masks, but ... we leave being called granddaughter or daughter or baby.”

“Each elder,” Whitehair said, “has inspired us in a special way.”

For these women, their own relatives served as inspiration for their work.

Harvey’s grandmothers are living, but she’s driven by the thought they easily could have been among those taken by the novel coronavirus that causes COVID-19.

“It just broke my heart to think that could be my grandma,” she said. “And I don’t want to lose her to this invisible enemy that we’re fighting against.”

Added Whitehair: “I think we just kind of forget who our first teachers were, and that was our grandparents. And for me, both my grandparents have passed on. So it’s been kind of like, how do I give back? How do I make my grandparents proud?”

Since moving back to Leupp six years ago, Harvey has been connecting with the community. The pandemic has helped her find a way not only to give back but to build new relationships.

Among her earliest supporters was her manager at Sam’s Club.

“I explained to him what we were doing and that our community isn’t getting any help, and he just told me ‘Stop right there,’ and he reached into his pocket and literally handed me $100,” she said.

She accepted the money, then began to cry.