

Looking for resolution

Written by By Boderra Joe Sun Correspondent
Friday, 09 February 2018 08:52



Families of missing, murdered indigenous people gather at rally

Surely, pinning up flyers of missing and murdered individuals in local communities helps get the word out there, but for the family of victims, waiting on some type of resolution can feel like torture.

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In the case of unsolved murders, for victims' families, emotions scar and frustration runs high. Such as the case of Leland Antonio Tso, 37, of Wheatfields, Ariz., who was murdered July 5, 2016.

Tso's niece, Tiara Shorty, also from Wheatfields, and her family participated in the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Men and Women awareness drive at Red Rock Park in Gallup Feb. 3.

Tso's family mingled with other families facing similar pain – no closure and an ongoing mystery surrounding the murder or disappearance of a loved one.

"It was overwhelming because when you go through this, you think, this is affecting me and my family, but you don't realize that there are other families out there that are experiencing the exact same thing you are," Shorty said.

Participants brought their signs, flyers, posters and banners to raise awareness and focus on the missing and murdered indigenous men and women in the United States.

Meskee Yatsayte, founder of Navajo Nation Missing Persons Updates, said the organization was launched in May 2013, but recently became fully active in July 2017. The awareness drive seemed like a natural step to take in moving the organization forward.

"I wanted to bring it here [awareness drive] to Gallup because we really don't see too much of that," she said. "We are just now waking up the public because a lot of people don't realize how many people are missing."

NUMBERS RISING

For the Navajo Nation, there are 28 missing persons: 17 males, 11 females. There are three unidentified; and for the Missing Persons of the 21 Pueblos across Arizona, New Mexico and Texas, there are five currently missing. Yatsayte believes there are two more.

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Not to mention Navajo Nation Police Officers that were murdered in the line of duty.

There's over 100,000 missing on an average, yearly, and over 40,000 unidentified, Yatsayte said.

And only 6,000 out of the 100,000 are reported and submitted to the National Crime Information Center. Why? Some police officers don't enter missing person reports into the NCIC, Yatsayte claims.

"There's so many people out there that if it's not in the database, nobody else is going to know they're missing," she said. "It's really important for future missing reports that they get entered into the data base."

If an individual has been missing for more than three weeks, Yatsayte said they get entered into the data base under the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System.

"We use that [NamUs] a lot for our research," Yatsayte said.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

While the grief-stricken, Tso's family remains dedicated in their quest to find justice. There's a killer still out there afterall.

"Now that I have been touched by this tragedy, my family and I are doing everything we can to get awareness out there," Shorty said. "It's big once you get affected by it. It changes you."

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Being around other people at the awareness drive, going through similar pain, brought comfort, Shorty explained. It was also uplifting to feel support from the community.

“We got a lot of responses driving through town,” Shorty said about participating in the awareness drive. “People were slowing down. People were honking.”

The organization has certainly been doing its part as Yatsayte and other advocates travel to different locations to raise awareness by taking flyers to chapter houses, churches, detox centers and shelters.

In addition, Navajo Nation Vice President Jonathan Nez, stands behind the organization, and because of him, awareness of the crisis has grown, Yatsayte noted.

The organization also collaborates with Strengthening Families, Navajo Nation Council Delegate Amber Crotty, Sexual Assault Prevention Subcommittee and Human Trafficking.

MAINTAINING AWARENESS

“When you go to Walmart, to the post office, all you see are missing and murdered flyers,” Yatsayte said. “That’s not how it should be. People know stuff and they should share it.”

Those flyers pinned up in local gas stations, post offices, restaurants, are kept in a booklet that Yatsayte created.

“Something needs to be done about this [missing/murdered] because the numbers are rising. And nobody talks about this,” Yatsayte said. “I don’t want their faces or names to be forgotten. They need justice. That’s our main focus.”

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For Shorty's family, finding Tso's murderer has become a part of their everyday life.

"My family and I have been trying to get justice and closure for my uncle," Shorty said. "There are people out there that have information."

COMMUNITY OUTREACH

Yatsayte encourages people to get involved with the organization, which responsibilities would include helping to maintain the Facebook page by posting missing individuals, and creating and distributing flyers.

"You got to want to make a change," Yatsayte said.

She encourages people to like the organization's Facebook page, and share the postings of missing and murdered people.

But, while social media is a fast and active way to notify the community, not everyone has access to the Internet. Yatsayte said she posts flyers "anywhere there's a waiting room" and works to forge connections with local law enforcement.

Yatsayte and other advocates go out every other Saturday in the surrounding communities, and stand beside the road with their missing person flyers and signs.

"We hope to spread more awareness that way," she said

In addition, according to NNMPU Facebook page, they have an "Unofficial NNMPU Text Alert System." It's a sign-up system that allows the organization to send out text alerts to cellphones when someone goes missing or believed to be endangered.

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So far, more than 16,000 people have signed-up for the service.

ISSUES

Some people that go missing may be at a higher risk due to domestic violence, sexual assault, drug and alcohol addiction, and human and sex trafficking. Others may be suicidal or suffer from mental illness.

“People ask ‘how is that possible?’” Yatsayte said. “It is possible. I have at least five or six of them that may be domestic grounds related and a lot of them are drug and alcohol abuse related.”

She hopes to continue to open the eyes of the community and let everyone know that people are still missing. And those who have been murdered, the family deserves justice.

“I hope that anyone that knows any information will come forward,” she said. “Or for those individuals who had part in it ... to turn themselves in.”

For more information, contact Meskee Yatsayte. Email: NavNatMis@PerUp505@gmail.com

Visit: <https://www.facebook.com/NavajoNationMissingPersonsUpdates/>

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