

## The strong Navajo support for District Attorney Karl Gillson

To understand what motivated McKinley County's former district attorney, Karl Raymond Gillson, who died on Jan. 24 at the age of 58 after a long illness, all one would have to do would be to look at his record as a Gallup state magistrate in the 1990s.

He had been accused of being too hard on the people who came before him for sentencing. He said he knew that people who had multiple DWI convictions would try their best to get their cases heard by any other magistrate.

"I can see why the other magistrates give lighter sentences. Its better for their political careers," he said, adding that he could see how people could get one or two DWIs by not concentrating on how much they had been drinking. But those with four, five, six or more convictions are not able to use that defense.

"Those individuals need to be put in prison for as long as possible to protect area residents from having a close encounter with one of them on the road after midnight on Saturday or Sunday," he said.

Gillson never had to worry about getting enough votes to be re-elected because the Navajo population in McKinley and San Juan counties could be counted on to give him their support on Election Day, because they knew he was trying to cut crime in the rural areas of those counties.

It was not unusual for Gillson to win the vote in every chapter in San Juan County, where state law required him to run because he serviced the entire 11th Judicial District, while he only had the authority in McKinley County.

Just how popular he was with the Navajo voter could be seen when he won the primary in 2012 despite strong opposition from Navajo and Anglo challengers. In addition, he was unable to do any campaigning because of his battle with a liver disease ... but just his name on the ballot was enough campaigning to get his Navajo base out to the polls on Election Day.

This concern for his Navajo constituents could be seen a few years after he was first elected district attorney. He said he had been receiving a lot of calls from women who were regularly being abused by their boyfriends or husbands.

Gillson realized women in the county, especially Native American women, needed help from his office, so he sought and got grants so he could hire two more attorneys for his office, and assign them to handle domestic violence cases, exclusively.

It was logical that Gillson had the pulse of the county, since he was born in Gallup but was raised in Lupton. He came back to the Gallup area when he became enrolled in the schools in Rehoboth. He graduated from Rehoboth High School and then went to Dordt University in Iowa where he participated in cross country.

He transferred to New Mexico State University where he majored in political science. After graduating summa cum laude from NMSU, he attended a pre-law summer institute because he wanted to go to law school that fall. He enrolled at the University of New Mexico Law School and graduated in 1991.

After graduation, he got a job in the McKinley County District Attorney’s Office as a deputy attorney. Two years later, with the encouragement of the Navajo Nation’s president, Peterson Zah, he indicated he was interested in a vacancy in the magistrate court.

A little later, New Mexico Gov. Bruce King appointed him to the position. Gillson was 30 years

old, making him the youngest person ever appointed to that position.

As a magistrate judge, he set up a program providing for Navajo, Zuni and Spanish interpreters if they were needed.

He also pushed and got an alternative resolution program put into effect, and created a Navajo Peacemaking program in the courts.

In 2000, he ran for district attorney and easily won the election. He would spend the next 17 years of his life serving the county as district attorney. In 2012 he became ill with a reported liver problem and his illness became so severe that he was forced to work from home beginning in 2014.

Despite this and the fact that he spent little or no money on his campaign, not being able to actually do much campaigning, he still won the election. A few months later, however, his illness forced him to step down as district attorney.

Among his many accomplishments as district attorney was the expansion of the office, and the addition of several more attorneys to handle the growing number of cases.

He also spent time trying to deal with complaints about fraud in the city's Indian Arts stores. One case he took to court involved a woman who spent several thousand dollars on Indian jewelry she thought was made by a master jeweler.

However, when she met the silversmith a short time later, he told her he never made the pieces, adding that the jewelry wasn't worth anywhere near what she paid for it. When the store owner refused to give her money back, she went to Gillson, who decided to charge the store owner with fraud as a message to others in the city who might be breaking arts and crafts law.

He won the case and the store owner was given probation and required to pay restitution. The

owner was a young man who had been given the initial stock when he was set up in business by his father.  It turned out that he had been struggling financially for years and closed his store just before the trial.

Gillson also helped out in other areas as well, serving as a member of the board of directors for DNA Legal Services and as chair of the county's bar association.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, only family members were invited to his funeral.

The family announced that a memorial service will be held when the pandemic is over.