

Native group protests for justice, equal rights

Written by By Marley Shebala Sun Correspondent
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It was April 4, the first weekend of the month and, as usual, the city streets were packed with vehicles and people filled the sidewalks. But there were other sounds and sights.

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About 50 people walked down Route 66 chanting, “Hey Gallup, you can’t hide, you support genocide.”

Melanie Yazzie, a co-founder of The Red Nation, said, “We’re here today to tell the city of Gallup to tell its economic system that profits off of our deaths, we are reclaiming this space as indigenous space.

“I’m here on behalf of The Red Nation,” said Yazzie. “We demand to thrive, just not survive. We demand life, not just death. And we don’t demand just respect, we demand that the laws that are supposed to protect us are enforced to protect native people and that the city of Gallup and the United States acknowledge the fact that the entire system, the economic system, the political system and the cultural and social system, is premised on colonial violence against native people.”

Stella Johnson, a local organizer for The Red Nation who also identified herself as a transgender woman, said she’s been trying to understand the continued violence against the homeless, lesbians and transgender people.

“I’m here because we need change,” Johnson said. “We need accountability.”

Johnson called for a joint “ethical” investigation by the Navajo Nation and the city of the Gallup Detox Center, which replaced the Na’nizhoozhi Center; the abolition of the criminalization and racial discrimination of Native people, especially the low-income, homeless, and LGBTQs (Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, Transgenders, and Queers), which would require the repealing of all anti-homeless and anti-poor laws.

“We demand an end to the aggressive panhandling ordinances in Gallup and the forceful use of the New Mexico Detoxification Act to harass Native people and excessively place them in protective custody,” Johnson said.

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Johnson also said that Native participation in the local political structures must be openly encouraged and promoted, along with Native-owned businesses.

Johnson said that the state of New Mexico, McKinley County Commission and city must review and enforce liquor license laws, instead of profiting from the deaths of Native people.

“So many years have passed and we are still being exterminated,” she said. “Over 170 relatives have died unnaturally the past three years and liquor saturates these streets. It is no longer an Indian problem; it is a people problem.»

Nick Estes, a Lower Brule Lakota and The Red Nation member, said he grew up in Rapid City, SD, and feels the city is also plagued by racism.

“But I have never experienced a more racist and violent city than Gallup,” Estes said. “So when we’re talking about border town violence, we’re not just talking about the actual acts of violence, people dying on the streets but the ways in which the city extracts value, extracts profit from native people.”

Estes said he believes it to be a dependence upon Navajo-generated business.

“Indians don’t depend on Gallup; Gallup depends on Indians,» he said.

Maxine Hanley, 56, of Tohatchi said she turned her vehicle around when she saw the banners, yellow placards and the crowd of people at the chamber of commerce.

“I’m a recovering alcoholic,” said Hanley.

She drank for 36 years and it took a toll on her husband, children and grandchildren.

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In 2010, Hanley decided it was time to stop and find out what was wrong.

She said she remembered asking herself if there was anything better in life.

Hanley said she went to the behavioral health center on the east side of Gallup and asked someone to please help her because she didn't want to die.

She said she was admitted for treatment and on the sixth day, she wondered if she could handle it.

"I cried for three days and then I realized that I'm not the only one with issues in their lives," Hanley said. "It came to me that there is help out there if you wanted it. I wanted it. I wanted to change my life for myself, my kids. I wanted to be a better person. My grandchildren didn't know me. They called me Maxine. They call me grandmother now."

Hanley said her goal was also to return to school and in 2012 she enrolled in the University of NM-Gallup branch. She said that she recently earned a 4.0 grade point average, which put her on the Dean's List.

"I never thought I could do it," Hanley said. "People give me hope. We all struggle. The people on the streets are my family because I lived with them. Alcoholism is a disease that brings homelessness, domestic violence, intoxicated transients, violence."

And it was with that thought in mind that she said she came up with the following solution: the Gallup Dextox Center needs to be fully funded and fully staffed with trained professionals.

Hanley said it will take a series of meetings for the surrounding tribes, the city, county and state to come together.

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Hanley said that the students of UNM-Gallup could help by mobilizing and reaching out to the surrounding tribes, the city, county and state with solutions.

“By coming together we can create a better Gallup and help those individuals who are suffering from alcoholism,” she said. “My personal suggestion for all would be take a step back and realize that this problem indirectly affects us all whether or not we consume or are in recovery from alcoholism.