

Top Five Stories of 2015

Written by Chrissy Largo's Picks Sun Correspondent
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As I reflect back on the stories that I've covered in the year of 2015, I chose the top five that stood out to me as important stories of 2015.

Recycling and reusing jamboree event

It was nice to see many friendly faces once I walked into the doors of Gallup's Community Center on Oct.31 as I was about to embark on covering an annual event called the "Recycling and Reusing Jamboree Event."

Those friendly faces were Gerald O'Hara, vice president of the McKinley Citizens Recycling Council, Board Secretary Shafiq Chaudhary and Board member Betsy Windisch.

As an avid recycler myself, I thought it would be kind of cool to check it out and I am glad that I did. Put together by the MCRC, a non-profit organization that for the last five years, has organized the event to allow thrift savvy residents to showcase their recycled-goods-turned-into-treasured-goods for sale.

I instantly fell in love with former English teacher, Elizabeth Foutenot's, cute and crafty projects that included an array of gift boxes, found at various thrift and Micheal's craft stores, covered with words from the Bible or dictionary. I learned she practically found all her crafting tools at nearby thrift stores and off the shelves of clearance racks. I was immediately inspired once I got home to cut up all my old recycled books and paste on the words of my favorite author onto an old shoe box!

I just remember how unique and fun this event, and it was for a great cause for the whole community of Gallup to learn how to repurpose their recycled materials.

Alcatraz occupation and an unjust sterilization

With many historical events that took place during the 1960's, the Alcatraz Island takeover is one event that has always intrigued me. So, when I heard about the Nov. 7 event hosted by Octavia Fellin's Public Library, as part of the Native American Heritage Month, and two Native American guest speakers by the names of Jean Whitehorse and Lenny Foster would be presenting about their own Alcatraz experience, I knew I would be taking part in a moment in history.

To many, the Alcatraz Island occupation, is a true and defining moment in Native American history, which gave Native Americans the opportunity to address issues that were ignored for so long by the United States government. It was also a political movement that demonstrated Indian self-determination.

However, one thing that stuck out to me about Whitehorse's experience is a bit of information that had nothing to do with Alcatraz. I would never forget as she explained in detail, upon returning to Gallup in 1973, how she was a victim of sterilization.

"The federal government targeted the unborn of Native babies through the federal health clinic. We didn't have a choice," she said. "We were labeled unfit, poor, and uneducated. I became a victim of this after I had one daughter."

She explained that it began when she had an infection in her appendix, so she drove herself to a clinic and the doctors told her that they could not operate on her until she signed some papers. At that point, she was in extreme pain so she signed the documents, not knowing it was for sterilization.

Whitehorse knows that this kind of unlawful treatment, sterilization, occurred to other Native American women, but she could not prove it at the time. Documentation at the time was mishandled, misinterpreted or simply lost. Her private testimony about her unjust sterilization experience should never be forgotten.

The ridiculousness of 'Ridiculous 6'

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As part of Native American Heritage Month, I had a rare chance to see two Native American actors, Loren Anthony and Goldie Tom, speak about their walk off on the set of Adam Sandler's controversial movie, "Ridiculous 6" hosted by Gallup's Octavia Fellin's Public Library Nov. 9.

I applauded their act of bravery as they both talked in depth about how the evolutionary roles in which Native American stereotypes have been cast in past and present films, and why these particular stereotypical roles are still harmful to the image of Native Americans today.

"It just takes one person to say, 'enough is enough.' And if we get enough people on board, then the world will listen and say 'hey these natives are something, they do have a voice,'" Anthony said.

I believe that for too long movie industries have portrayed Native Americans in an incorrect or negative light. To me, it is still amazing that two young Native Americans stood up for what was right for Native Americans as a whole.

In a world that is still mesmerized by the many romanticized portrayals of Native American roles, these two actors made a monumental leap into changing that for upcoming accurate Native American roles in film.

Japanese-American internment camps

If there was another chapter in U.S. history that was not taught during my high school history courses, this was one subject that I was unfamiliar with. I was very ignorant to the fact that as many as 6,000 Japanese-Americans were rounded up by train and held in imprisonment camps throughout the United States. This came after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on the dreadful day of Dec. 7, 1941.

As part of a project called, "Confinement in the Land of Enchantment," or CLOE, under the New Mexico Chapter of the Japanese American Citizens League (NM JACL), Victor Yamada, special projects coordinator, spoke to an audience on Nov. 19 at the University of New Mexico's Gallup campus to educate students about the history of his people.

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Three guest speakers spoke about their experiences while they lived in various internment camps. One presenter, Sam Mihara, project director, and former child prisoner of the Heart Mountain, WY prison camp shared his experience during that difficult time as a child before departing from his home in San Francisco. He said buses were loaded and they were only allowed one suitcase per person.

What I remember him mentioning is the time when himself and his people made it to Heart Mountain prison camp, he remembers prison camp life extremely difficult. They had to share 16 toilets in a row that served 500 people. They were given food such as bread, potatoes, powdered milk, and mutton that was shipped from Australia.

"We said to the government, 'let us grow our own food.'" Mihara said, since they did not eat such foods.

The Japanese-Americans were allowed to clear and irrigate a section of land, and within a year, they had food. It reminded me how the Navajo people were given similar foods during and after their imprisonment during the Long Walk to Bosque Redondo, which was an Indian removal effort that stemmed from the U.S. government between 1863 to 1864.

UNM-Gallup student Ariana Joe, said of the presentation overall: "I think that it teaches people, later in the future, so that history won't repeat itself," she said. "and ultimately, I think this teaches people to try not to make the same mistakes again."

Frank Chiapetti's suspension and elusive investigative report

When Superintendent Frank Chiapetti was placed on administrative leave on Aug.17, and interim superintendent Carmen Moffett took his place, the details of his absence have yet to surfaced.

On Nov. 12, the Board voted 3-2 to retain Chiapetti as superintendent after a lengthy executive meeting that lasted more than 3 hours. However, the district continues to remain tightlipped on the whole Chiapetti investigation even though various New Mexico's Inspection of Public Record Act letters have been submitted to his Secretary Joan Nez.

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It's clear that they are in violation of IPRA and have put their heads in the sand on the matter, or it's a case of not being well-versed on the law.

If there is anything more non-transparent and uncertain that I had to partake in, it would have to go to the Gallup McKinley County Schools and its staff. Since attending their regular Monday school board meetings, I also find it disheartening that they allow "public comments" from the parents and staff; however, board members are not allowed to comment back based on these "public comments."

If anything, the district should make some of their New Year's resolutions to have some accountability to their communities and to be more transparent in their school affairs. After all, it's the taxpayers paying their salaries.