

Love is a 'Wild Thing'

Written by Story and photos by Andy Gibbons III Sun Correspondent
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Wild Thing Championship Bullriding revenue provides loving help for local youth

Imagine this: You turn 11 years old and are cut off from the last person you could have distantly called family. You are alone and you feel like no one wants you. No positive future seems to

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await you after school — that is, if you can finish it by yourself.

Eventually, opportunities to experiment with drugs and other risky behavior, and to enlist the help of gangs for safety become daily occurrences.

This story is a story with no fairy tale ending for many of New Mexico's youths. However, local community members and 65 volunteers from other states have partnered together to provide these young people without a stable home environment for a positive alternative: Manuelito Navajo Children's Home, and Gallup Christian School, a component of MNCH.

According to PrivateSchoolReview.com, GCS is an open-enrollment K-12 school that stresses a liberal arts education, offers extra-curricular activities, and bases its teaching on an enhanced home-schooling curriculum.

The children's home has been around since the 1950s, but few community members could tell you how it came about. The Gallup Church of Christ spearheaded an effort to start a church just west of Gallup with a pleasant, yet unforeseen, outcome.

"Missionaries were overwhelmed by the many Navajo families who were bringing them children to raise," Pastor Jeff Foster of the Church of Christ said. "The focus shifted from church-planting to establishing a group home for children."

Manuelito Navajo Children's Home has come quite a ways since the 1950s, when it consisted of two small cinderblock buildings. Besides housing, there's a brand-new playground, gymnasium, storage buildings, a school, and an office on 36 acres of property. The playground was installed three weeks ago, after a collective fundraising, with one anonymous donor contributing \$20,000.

There are several cottages with seven bedrooms and seven bathrooms each, where the children can live in a clean environment with commodities they're not used to having. House parents live among the children and work in rotations. The point isn't to be surrogate parents, but to model how a healthy family functions.

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"We're not a shelter; we emphasize the 'HOME' part of Manuelito Navajo Children's Home," Jim Christian, the superintendent of MNCH and GCS, said.

Most of the residents of the children's home also attend the Gallup Christian School on campus. Of the five residents who graduated from the school in May, all plan to continue their education.

"This would not have happened if they would not have been in the supportive structured environment of Manuelito Children's Home," Christian said.

Merle Roehr, a house parent and leader of the 65-plus volunteers for Wild Thing, agrees.

"It gives [the children] a stable environment and it gives them a better future most of the time," he said.

Wild Thing Championship Bullriding believes in MNCH's positive impact, and has been sponsoring it for the full 23 years of its existence under the leadership of Larry Peterson.

Christian said the Peterson family has been vital to MNCH, beginning with Peterson's father in the 1950s. This year, proceeds from parking lot fees and the concession stand hit \$13,000, all of which benefit MNCH.

Christian and others noted that the revenue from Wild Thing on July 8 - 9 made this "a good year." Still, the organization must spend roughly \$40,000 a year on propane, and \$25,000 for electricity with the money they receive from donations. Giving decreases in the summer months, but expenses remain the same. Any donation helps.

The infrastructure of MNCH is efficient and robust. They partner with local organizations like the Community Pantry to make sure the kids have a well-balanced diet. MNCH provides a donated

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wardrobe, as most kids arrive with only the worn-out clothes they are wearing.

Specific donations are preferred, otherwise, Christian said, “we would end up with a 1,000 bottles of syrup, but no pancake mix!”

It’s also important to protect the privacy of the children and families involved.

“Our most cherished memories center on those children who have come into our care from families fractured by domestic abuse, criminal activity, and/or substance abuse . . . children who have bounced from house to house . . . children who have lived in unsafe and unwholesome and destructive environments . . . and who have found a place of security, comfort and love with us,” Pastor Foster concluded. “It is a beautiful thing to watch a child who has come to us with little promise be given resources and opportunities to excel in life.”

This kind of love isn’t just a “beautiful thing.” In this case, it’s also a ‘Wild Thing.’

For more information, call (505) 863-5530

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