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UNM-G exhibit event sheds light on mining aftermath in N.M.

The University of New Mexico-Gallup hosted a night of poetry and storytelling Oct. 17 as part of the *Limb, Life, and Bread - Voices on Mining in New Mexico* exhibit, on display Oct. 15 through Nov. 9, at the Ingham Chapman Gallery.

The event was hosted by assistant professor Carmela Lanza, who said the evening was the result of a campus humanities collaboration relating to mining in New Mexico. She called it an evening of many voices and various mediums, among which were film, artifacts and prose.

The goal of the event was to give a voice to people who do not have one when it comes to the effects of uranium mining in New Mexico.

In addition to several UNM-G students, one of the speakers at the poetry and storytelling event was Talia Boyd, program director of Conservation Voters New Mexico.

According to the CVNM website, Boyd was drawn to grassroots efforts on social and environmental issues in rural and indigenous communities after witnessing the dewatering of aquifers through the extraction of non-renewable energies and the ongoing effects of abandoned uranium mines.

At the event, Boyd recalled a story in which youth near Tuba City, Ariz. played on a large mound that turned out to be radioactive. The victims did not know the land was toxic — a result of the uranium mining that occurred across the Navajo Nation — until it was too late.

Similar tales were shared by several Navajo Nation residents in the short film, *Tale of a Toxic Nation* , which was screened at the event.

The film, which states there are over 500 abandoned uranium mines across the reservation, discusses the cleanup efforts on radioactive land, which have been made more difficult due to actions taken by the current presidential administration, which the film states is “threatening to reinstate uranium mining in the area.”

According to Boyd, the film is “a really powerful, fairly new video. I’ve grown to love these people [in the documentary]. They’ve paved the road for me to be here today.”

Boyd discussed some of the major hotspots for radioactive terrain across the reservation, specifically Gray Mountain, Ariz., Monument Valley, Utah, Red Rock, N.M. and perhaps most notably, Church Rock, N.M.

The Church Rock uranium mill spill occurred on July 16, 1979, when United Nuclear Corporation’s mill tailings disposal pond breached its dam, pouring over 1,000 tons of radioactive waste and over 90 million gallons of radioactive solution into the Puerco River. It remains the largest accidental spill of radioactive materials in U.S. history.

Boyd said residents in such areas were often affected by the fallout of uranium mining when they built structures from radioactive materials on land that was also affected.

Boyd said it’s difficult for victims of the mining aftermath to take legal action on the matter because energy companies that deal with radioactive materials often change their names.

“[They] keep people guessing. [We] can’t keep track of them,” Boyd said.

Despite these hurdles, Boyd said efforts are ongoing to establish a moratorium on mining across the reservation.

It’s difficult, she said, to get federal and state entities to cooperate on the matter, but CVNM will persevere because there are lives at stake.

Sharmayne Thompson, a UNM-G student, spoke for those very lives.

Thompson addressed the crowd on a personal note rather than through poetry or a political discussion. She spoke about the effects uranium mining has had on her family, most especially on her grandfather.

“It’s something that hits close to home for me,” she said — her grandfather was a miner who turned 90 in May.

Thompson was overcome with emotion as she spoke about her grandfather’s liver disease and radiation burns, which resulted from his mining days. She said it pains her family to see him suffer such complications.

Thompson said the effects of mining can still be seen in the community her grandfather worked in, with its abandoned buildings, warning signs and protective fences.

“When you drive through the community, there’s just this sense of sadness,” she said.

And the effects of uranium mining go beyond her family’s emotional wellbeing, according to Thompson, who described a visit to the doctor some time back, which revealed that she

suffered from some of the same internal health complications as her grandfather.

Despite the monetary compensation that has come from legal action, Thompson said the damage has already been done, and will continue to happen unless changes are made.

“Money doesn’t replace anything that’s going to happen to us,” she said.

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