

Navajo Prep senior project generates smiles

Written by By Kevin Opsahl Sun Correspondent
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Special Olympians receive cleaning, protective supplies

Navajo Preparatory School senior Kaitlynn Knight said she could not see the faces of Special Olympians and parents through their masks when they stopped by the McKinley County Sheriff's Office last week — but she knows they smiled.

For her senior project, Knight raised enough money to buy home cleaning and coronavirus-protective supplies for the families to take home in baskets. For two hours, on April 24, Knight handed off almost a dozen baskets through the families' car windows as they drove through the Sheriff's Office parking lot.

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Knight's project was part of CAS, a graduation requirement for the Navajo Prep seniors that blends together creativity, activity and service in a project of their choice.

Knight knew just the subject she wanted to focus on: Special Olympics. Her brother, Rylee, a 19-year-old who has Down Syndrome, has competed with the athletes in just about everything — from bowling to volleyball — for eight years.

"I admire my brother a lot for doing Special Olympics because he is a very independent person and he's the strongest person I know that won't let anything stop him from what he loves to do," Knight wrote in an email to the *Gallup Sun*.

To accomplish her senior project, Knight used online crowdsourcing to raise money for the baskets of supplies. Then, she needed to look for space to give them away. Early on, she spoke with Janie Lee Hall, director of Special Olympics New Mexico-Area 6 and Judith Goins, a staffer at the McKinley County Sheriff's Office.

"I just wanted to be able to give these families the supplies that are sparse," Knight said.

The baskets included hand sanitizer, soap, Lysol spray, masks, and gloves.

Hall said she appreciates Knight choosing the program as the focus of her senior project.

"I think she also integrated the needs of families within this area for COVID-19 supplies, because it's still an ongoing pandemic," Hall said. "This required her to step out of her comfort zone a little and I think that's a really important thing as you're reaching adulthood."

Knight plans to distribute the rest at a local Special Olympics practice on May 1 — the first time the athletes are reported to gather for in-person activities since the pandemic began.

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“When she called me, I was really excited,” Goins said. “There are so many other different community-related events she could have done and she chose Special Olympic athletes and their families. This just goes to show you what kind of a person Kaitlynn is.

“Unfortunately, it’s harder to raise money — everyone forgets about the Special Olympics,” Goins said. “Kaitlynn just wanted to reach out and [let] them know, ‘hey, we’re here for you, we haven’t forgotten about you and here’s a little bit of encouragement to keep you going.’”

Aside from her Sheriff’s Office duties, Goins is also a regional coordinator for the New Mexico Law Enforcement Torch Run for Special Olympics, a nonprofit. The organization’s website calls its law enforcement agency members “guardians of the flame,” providing support to Olympians with special needs year-round.

Cindy Ramirez, a parent of a 25-year-old Special Olympian named Tessa, was one of several people who met Kaitlynn April 24 to pick up a basket of supplies.

“We weren’t 100 percent needing it,” Ramirez said. “To my daughter, Tessa, we always need it. When someone offers things like that, she’s excited to go and get one, whether she needs it or not.”

When Ramirez rolled up in her car to receive Knight’s basket, she thanked her.

“That was so awesome of her to think like that. There are not very many people that will,” Ramirez said, referring to Knight’s decision to make her senior project about the Special Olympics. “She has a very big heart.”

Ramirez added that what Knight did was significant because during the pandemic, some people with disabilities don’t understand what’s going on. That can be a problem for people like Tessa, who have been vaccinated.

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“We don’t know how they would carry the sickness and how they would react,” Ramirez said. “We know how to act and say, ‘Hey, we’re hurting.’ Tessa won’t understand all of that.”

Knight’s fundraising project comes as members of the Special Olympics have been hit especially hard by the pandemic, because as with other athletic pursuits, they are not able to compete in person.

“Special Olympics have been doing everything that they can to keep our athletes active and participating as much as we can, even if it’s from home,” Goins said. “We’ve had to really modify a lot of the things that they do.”

For Knight’s brother, that adjustment meant playing basketball or volleyball from his grandmother’s house, where he has more space to do it than at home. Photos were taken of him performing each activity so they could be documented for the Special Olympics organization.

“It just keeps him on his feet,” Knight said.

Knight is looking forward to the first in-person Special Olympics practice May 1 and resuming her role of “unified partner” — someone without a disability who is there to advise team members — the way it was meant to be.

“I do wish the best for the Special Olympics,” Knight said.

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