

TUBA CITY, Ariz. -As a Navajo Nation Code Talker, Sergeant Major Dan Akee is a national treasure whose military service is a testament to freedom and cultural perseverance. He is one of the few remaining Code Talkers left on the Navajo Nation.

Akee's hearing is failing and his eyesight has diminished. He gets around with the assistance of a walker and the help of his son Danny.

As he's grown older, Dan Akee has expressed a lingering desire to live in the home he built for his family that now sits dormant and unoccupied. The house, which was built in the mid 50s, is in severe need of roof repair and overall renovation.

He often reminisces about raising his children and grandchildren in the home. Through his memories he catches glimpses of hope in a nostalgic rearview mirror.

"I was sitting outside with him and he was crying," Akee said. "He said he wished God would bless him to somehow have the house fixed."

Currently, the Code Talker and his family live in a doublewide mobile home that sits directly east of the old brick-structure. But the elder Akee said he would be more comfortable in the house he built.

"I have a lot of memories there. This trailer, although it looks nice, I'm not comfortable here," he said. "Having my home fixed would be a wish come true."

Akee's words were not in vain. His wishes were conveyed to Eunice Begaye, Veteran's Service Officer in Tuba City through Arnold Maryboy, Veteran's Commander.

Begaye conducted a home visit to Akee's residence to assess the extent of the damages. It was then that she knew the renovation of Akee's home was a worthy cause. She then went to work organizing volunteers and resources.

"We have donated a lot of our time and money to make it possible for him to come back into his house," she said. "I have so much appreciation for those people who have been willing to help without asking for money. They are volunteering their time to make Mr. Akee's dream a reality."

In a coordinated effort, organized by the Tuba City Veteran's Service Office and Red Feather Construction, with assistance from the Office of the President and Vice President (OPVP), a group of volunteers rolled up their sleeves to begin cleaning and renovating Akee's residence.

On Nov. 7, volunteers, who included both President Russell Begaye and Vice President Jonathan Nez, dedicated an entire Saturday afternoon to removing old counters, bathtubs, and window frames.

These volunteer efforts exemplify what the Begaye-Nez administration has continued to promote in both supporting Navajo veterans and empowering communities through sweat equity not entitlement.

"We have partners out here that are assisting like Red Feather Construction," Nez said. "This is a good example of getting everybody together to help and empower our people through volunteer assistance and in this case rebuilding and remodeling a home for a Navajo Nation Code Talker."

As the day began, rooms in the house were filled with boxes of old clothes and the floors had thick coats of dust and sand from years of vacancy. Construction leads directed the crews of volunteers toward the day's objectives.

Taking a quick break from hammering out window frames for replacement, Begaye commented that the day's efforts were certainly worthy and appreciated.

"God blessed us with a beautiful day to work and assist our Code Talker and it's good to see a lot of folks out here trying to help," he said. "We just removed all the windows. We did a lot of clean up in and around the house and now we can get it ready for some interior building."

Begaye said the next big project would be to replace the roofing and then start working on renovating the interior and eventually paint the house.

Eunice Begay agreed the roofing would be next in line and put a two-week timeframe on completing that project with weather permitting.

"It will be quite an accomplishment when the roofing is finished," she said. "We're hoping to have it done in two weeks."

Being back in his home is his dream and Code Talker Akee said he hopes to see this before his days are done.

"That's something that we need to work with," she said.

Before the noon hour, Akee came outside to greet the volunteers and leadership. With the help of his son and grandson, he let everyone know he was very grateful for everyone coming together to help him.

His jacket and hat were emblazoned with U.S Marine logos, which is the branch of military in which he served. As with most Navajo Code Talkers, his service was top secret and many of his stories remain untold.

"They didn't talk about it and he still doesn't want to talk about it," said his son Danny. "He has told me some of his war stories but for the most part that is in the past. That's the way my dad is."

Danny said he hadn't known his father was a Code Talker until the 70s when the Navajo Code Talkers were being recognized and honored with gold and silver medals.

This simple aspect of Akee's perspective truly exemplifies the humility and integrity with which our Code Talkers served our country for the greater purpose of our Navajo Nation.

"They are not just Navajo Nation treasures. They are national and international treasures," said President Begaye.

Akee obliged requests for photos. He called upon his grandson to fetch his uniform that he displayed with pride. His wife Martha joined him for a few photos. His movements and words were carefully chosen and deliberate.

Inspired by his quick visit, volunteers went back to work clearing the final remnants in the near empty rooms and packing boxes of memories into storage. The metal trash container was filled to capacity with refuse removed from the house.

When it came time to call it a day, the once cluttered and dusty home was clean and empty. The preparation for future renovations and roofing were set in place.

"We're not done yet," Begaye said. "OPVP is going to help buy more materials. They are needed and we are going to pitch in and buy them to make this into a good, solid house again

for him to live in."

Nez reinforced that veterans have been put to the forefront of the administration's pillars. With the help of collaborative partners, departments and programs, making tangible change for veterans is completely possible, he said.

"We're not trying to reinvent the wheel. There are great partners out there and what we'd like to do is take it to the next level by bringing everybody together," he said.

Eunice Begay expressed her gratitude for the assistance the volunteers and OPVP had provided that day.

"I appreciate the President and his staff being here today," she said. "It's wonderful to see him out here working."

For Akee, his wish to be back in the home he built will be realized very soon. His service and legacy as a Navajo Code Talker will not be forgotten. Instead, a culmination of efforts will work to make his wish a reality.