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Wearing a headband, bowguard, turquoise necklace and moccasins, Joe Kee blessed the new Native American Studies section at the Zollinger Library on The University of New Mexico-Gallup campus Nov. 2.

Kee is an associate professor of Navajo language and Navajo government at UNM-Gallup. He performed a Blessingway Ceremony with a Navajo wedding basket, arrowhead, blanket, corn pollen and water while speaking Diné bizaad to acknowledge and honor the many Indigenous peoples in this country and on this continent, including those from the Navajo, Zuni, Laguna, Hopi and Apache nations who live in the region.

“The purpose for this blessing is really in acknowledging the existence of a new Native American Studies section inside the Zollinger Library that will house hundreds of books where Indigenous students and students of all backgrounds can come in and learn about the people,” Kee said. “Its purpose is to offer appreciation and make sure the folks involved — past, present and future of UNM-Gallup faculty, staff and students — will continue to build a connection to this place and that learning and knowledge will continue to grow.”

Kee said he came from a traditional Navajo upbringing, so he learned to conduct such blessings

from the elders and medicine people in his family. At one point in his life, he recognized the responsibility had been vested in him to carry on their teachings.

The dedication ceremony was the library's official introduction to the newly organized collection of books on Indigenous history, art, anthropology, science and more.

The library's Director Markos Chavez said that when he came to work for UNM-Gallup at the end of February, he asked the staff for ideas. Research librarian Jim Fisk mentioned that he always wanted to have a Native American Studies section at the library, and Chavez wholeheartedly agreed it was needed.

Markos then consulted with library info specialist Yolanda Chavez to see if the plan was feasible or "a dream for another time."

They decided to move forward with the idea and got to work pulling Native American books from separate sections all over the library and re-cataloguing them for the new section.

The library staff finalized the new Native American Studies section in August, but they decided to wait until National Native American Heritage Month in November to officially unveil the collection.

"My big dream now is to use this as a beacon to bring people here and have them come into the library and make use of this section and find the materials they need, honor the culture and learn the history," Markos said.

Fisk and Markos added that Kee was supportive of the idea from the beginning and helped to identify some must-have titles for the collection early on.

Kee said he supported the project because it was important to him that UNM-Gallup be a place where Native American students could have a place for learning and knowledge.

“We are a young population,” Kee said. “We’re losing quite a bit of the language and the cultural and traditional teachings due to the communication gap that may exist between the older generation and the younger generation. As a young nation, it’s important to just become a force in moving the nation forward, and the only way that can happen is in pursuing a formal education while at the same time maintaining our connection to the cultural aspect of who we are as a person.”

He noted that many elders tell young people, “T’áá Hó Ájít’éego,” which means, “It is entirely up to you to succeed.”

“That goes back to our elders who were incarcerated at Fort Sumner,” Kee said. “That’s where one of the great Navajo leaders, Chief Manuelito, said ‘Education is a ladder. Continue to climb this ladder.’ He foresaw that years down the road for his people, in order to be successful, that our children take to learn as much as they can in the formal education system while at the same time maintaining ties to their cultural groups.”

Fisk noted that the Zollinger Library is open to the general public — not just the students, staff and faculty of UNM-Gallup. Community members only need a photo ID to apply for a library card.

The library is located on the UNM-Gallup campus at 705 Gurley Ave. For information about the library, call (505) 863-7531 or visit the library’s website at gallup.unm.edu/library.

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