

Americans for Native Americans generously benefits the Community Pantry

Written by By Dee Velasco For the Sun
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ANA's helping hands extend far and wide in McKinley County

On Oct. 19, the Jim Harlin Community Pantry was presented with a generous check from Americans for Native Americans in the amount of \$56,850. Present at the event were Community Pantry Executive Director Alice Perez, Community Pantry COO Hilda Garcia-Kendall, Vice-Chairman of Americans for Native Americans Brian Reiff, ANA Corresponding Secretary Mary Lee Reiff, and ANA Recording Secretary Janet Grove.

Americans for Native Americans, a small organization formed in 1991 by Bill and Connie Eastburn, is based out of Doylestown, Penn., and has been helping the Community Pantry for the past 25 years.

According to ANA Vice-Chairman Brian Reiff, the Eastburns founded the organization with a strong statement that has grown into several projects.

According to its mission statement, ANA is “dedicated to improving the quality of life for Native Americans by providing essential goods and programs which foster self-reliance and mutual understanding.”

The Eastburns first heard of the needs of Native Americans in Gallup while they were on a trip in Rome, Italy. There, they met Bishop Pollot of McKinley County, who spoke of struggles facing Native Americans, such as homelessness and people dying in the streets from exposure to the cold. The Eastburn's compassion for Native Americans prompted them to raise the money for much-needed blankets.

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“The Eastburns said, ‘We won’t let that ever happen again,’ so that first year they sent out two tons of blankets,” Reiff said. “Since then, we continue the blanket distribution and have been doing other projects, always in this area.”

Reich said ANA works “with the Navajo, sometimes with the Hopi and Zuni, in fact we have a relationship with the Pueblo of Zuni, where we buy eyeglasses for young students and sometimes adults, and we’ve done quite a lot of those over the years.”

Among its services, ANA’s veterinarian event is held twice a year, Reich said, explaining that vets “come from all over the country to this area for about two weeks to set up animal clinics, large and small, offering services to animals that wouldn’t have that service.”

Community Pantry’s Back Pack Program

A large project that benefits from the generous ANA donation is the Back Pack program, started by the Community Pantry to help McKinley County-area elementary schools.

“Many of these children don’t have enough food at home; they do get a reduced breakfast and lunch at school, but when the weekend comes, there is not much food at home,” Perez, Community Pantry executive director, said of the children who benefit from the Back Pack program.

The program sends these kids home “with food in a bag that is child-friendly—child-friendly meaning the food doesn’t have to be cooked, food that they can pop open themselves, and eat right out of the cans. It used to be a back pack but now it’s a bag.”

Perez said the new funding will allow the Pantry “to service all the kids in our program here in McKinley County for the entire school year. It takes about \$3,500 a year to service one school.”

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The Pantry currently services 20 schools with the Back Pack program.

Community Pantry COO Hilda Garcia-Kendall Garcia-Kendall said she plans on adding two more schools to the current 20. Many children, she said, end up sharing food with their siblings “because they don’t have much themselves.” The backpack program aims to help in such cases.

Administrators as well as local schoolteachers and counselors in McKinley County identify the kids with the greatest needs. For the sake of confidentiality, the Pantry does not know who the individual children are.

Perez hopes initiatives like the Back Pack program will create a stir in the community, and increase its participation with the Community Pantry.

“Since we are only a staff of eight, we feed over 3,000 people a month,” Perez said. “We rely heavily on the volunteer base of our community members to help with us, organize, distribute, and hand out to the community.”

ANA in the schools

Aside from helping out the Community Pantry, which is one of the largest ANA projects, ANA also helps out local schools.

“We recently bought 40 sleeping mats for David Skeets Elementary [School] because the pre-school didn’t have any mats for the kids to sleep on,” ANA Corresponding Secretary Mary Lee Reiff said. “At Standing Rock, we bought bean bags chairs for the counselor because he had no place to sit to counsel his kids. We never assume the needs of the people we just listen to the needs of the people.”

ANA Recording Secretary Janet Grove, said they work with schools in requesting “clothing,

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educational books, and school supplies—we'll collect those and send them out each year. We had a heart-wrenching story where two children would share their school clothes, one child would wear the clothes in the morning and come home for lunchtime and change while his sibling would wear the same clothes that afternoon to school. So we're happy to meet these requests for these families.”

Whether it's blankets or clothing, the folks at ANA always try to send out new— rather than used—supplies, so the children feel good about the items they receive.

“That's why we always do 'tag-on,' meaning the store tag is still on the clothes,” Reiff said.

ANA also helped the “Young Parents” program at Central High School, bringing in 15 car seats for the student parents who attend the school. Such students can't ride the bus without car seats for their infants, so ANA stepped in so these young parents could stay in school.

ANA at the university

Another school-benefitting program is ANA's Nursing Program at the University of New Mexico-Gallup.

Reich said each semester the program gives scholarships to Native American nursing students enrolled at UNM-G.

“Upon graduating, we even pay for their Drexel nursing fees so that they may obtain their license and expand their horizons,” he said. “We also bring some of the nurses here at UNM-G to our Doylestown Hospital and mentor them with our nurses there.”

Reich said this year, two students who received scholarships are now employed in the area.

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“It’s wonderful to see that full-circle happen,” he said. “We gave to them and now they are giving back.”

Perez said the benefits from ANA’s roles in the Community Pantry and McKinley County run deep.

“They come down and spend a few days with us and they actually get their hands dirty, they help us constantly, they upgrade our facilities here, they’ve been working in our warehouse diligently, and even help with the program for the kids,” Perez explained. “They do so much for us here — and not just present us with the check — it’s all their help and work they do for us.”

ANA has grown wonderfully in the past two years, and as a result, this year, the program was able to fully fund the Pantry’s Back Pack program.

Visit: [Americans forNativeAmericans.org](http://AmericansforNativeAmericans.org)

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