



## OFFICE OF NAVAJO NATION HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

P.O. Box 1689

Window Rock, Arizona 86515

Phone: (928)871-7436 Fax: (928)871-7437

[speshlakai@navajo.org](mailto:speshlakai@navajo.org)

[www.NNHRC.navajo.org](http://www.NNHRC.navajo.org)

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### **Navajo Nation Human Rights Commission holds Public Hearing in Cortez, Colo.**

**St. Michaels, Ariz.** – The Navajo Nation Human Rights Commission (NNHRC) held a public hearing to assess race relations in Cortez, Colo. last Thursday.

Over fifty concerned community members, including Cortez Mayor Orly Lucero, Police Chief Roy C. Lane and Montezuma County Sheriff Gerald A. Wallace, sat in the audience at the Cortez City Council Chambers while 14 individuals provided testimony addressing discrimination to three NNHRC Commissioners, Vice-chair Clarence Chee, Ivin Gleason and Steve Darden.

The Commissioners were presented with issues concerning sub-standard living conditions, beatings of native peoples as recent as 2006 and racist remarks at local businesses among other concerns.

Toby Benally's woodworking business took him in a direction he never saw coming...making burial caskets.

Benally made reference to funeral homes saying he knows first hand what goes on in the industry. Although he wouldn't name any names, he explained many funeral homes charge high prices to Navajo families at a time when they're most vulnerable.

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“You cannot talk to a majority of Navajo people about this and you can’t really present it at chapter meetings,” Benally said. “Every single Navajo family that comes to us, they don’t know that they even have rights.”

Benally says we do this to ourselves because we choose to be uninformed.

Clyde Benally told the Commissioners of all the red tape he has to clear with the U.S. Forest Service in order to harvest herbs for ceremonies and claimed his rights were being violated according to the Treaty of 1868

Others presented testimony to the Commissioners about their efforts in addressing discrimination in Cortez.

Cortez resident Arthur Neskahi started the Southwestern Inter-tribal Voice in 2002 and remembers how defensive people became talking about racism during the first meeting they held.

“I wanted to be an advocate for Navajo in Cortez because there was no place for people to come for help with all the issues seen in border-towns regarding employment, housing and everything,” Neskahi said.

The NNHRC plans to hold public hearings in Aztec, Farmington, Bloomfield and Durango within the next few months. For more information contact NNHRC Public Information Officer Sheree Peshlakai at (928) 871-7436 or visit their website at [www.nnhrc.navajo.org](http://www.nnhrc.navajo.org).

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