



**NAVAJO NATION
DIVISION OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT**

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CONTACT: Rick Abasta
Public Information Officer
Phone: 928-871-6560
Fax: 928-871-7090
Email: rabasta@nndcd.org

New home constructed for Navajo elder through community effort



Yvondra Wauneka's new one-bedroom, one-bathroom home was constructed at a cost of \$35,000. The Ft. Defiance Chapter collaborated with Indian Health Services, Southwest Indian Foundation and various volunteers from local businesses to construct and furnish the new home. (Photo by Rick Abasta)

Navajo elder Yvondra Wauneka has a new home, thanks to the efforts of the Ft. Defiance Chapter and local community resources. Wauneka's home site is in the remote areas of the chapter boundaries, high in the hills of the Blue Canyon area, four miles off the main road.

A retired nurse, Wauneka has been living in substandard housing for 15 years, while suffering from a variety of chronic medical conditions. Lack of familial support and loneliness only aggravated these conditions for the senior citizen.

Stanley Yazzie, deputy director for Division of Community Development (DCD), said the joint efforts of the chapter, Indian Health Services (IHS), Southwest Indian Foundation (SWIF) and DCD have made the new home possible. "The chapter coordinator Dorothy Upshaw played a key role in making sure the house was built," Yazzie said. "It is now 90 percent completed."

DCD worked to ensure the chapter was purchasing materials and

providing manpower for the construction. Carpenters from the chapter's Personnel Employment Program completed the construction, including activation of the waterline in the home. Presently, Wauneka still needs electrical line connection to the one-bedroom, one-bathroom home.

"The assistance of Dr. Alvarez and others from IHS is greatly appreciated. Their help is indicative of commitment and dedication of professional staff, they go beyond their daily work to assist families," Yazzie said.

Community services coordinator Dorothy Upshaw said Wauneka first approached the chapter for housing 15 years ago and that an assessment was completed by the Navajo Environmental Protection Agency. EPA deemed her living conditions very poor.

The chapter did their own assessment of Wauneka's living conditions and found that she was living with her 18 sheep and 12 dogs. During the assessment, Wauneka said her family was unable to

help because of a lack of funds and other commitments.

“Currently, she is in Payson doing rehabilitation for strength and learning to take care of herself,” Upshaw said. She added that the home has been in development for years, but the major block to timely completion was the lack of funding.

Dr. Luisa Alvarez, an optometrist with Tsehootsooi Medical Center (TMC), has worked in the community for the past five years. During her time with IHS, Alvarez said she’s worked during off-duty hours with stray animals and eventually began working with community members. She first came in contact with Wauneka in 2008, at the eye clinic.

“On one particular day Ms. Wauneka began to cry uncontrollably in my office and I asked her to explain what the problem was,” Alvarez said. “She told me that she had too many animals and that one was hurt recently and she didn’t know what to do with them.”

Alvarez volunteered to come and help, finding seven dogs and six cats under the care of Wauneka. One dog had a deep laceration on its upper leg and Alvarez eventually transported all of the animals to the Coconino Animal Shelter in Flagstaff.

“I witnessed firsthand what a dilapidated house she was living in. It was at this point that I knew she needed help,” Alvarez said. She explained that Wauneka was lonely and distressed because she had no communication with her family.

Upshaw said the total cost of materials came to \$18,000. Labor costs for the construction crew of five totaled \$17,000. The entities

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involved in the project included the IHS Office of Environmental Health, SWIF and volunteers from the local community that donated goods.

OEH installed the bathroom fixtures, plumbed the bathroom and kitchen, mounted the cabinets and setup the water heater. SWIF installed the wood stove and helped with hanging drywall and painting the interior. The chapter did the bulk of construction, including the waterline, septic tank and leach field.

Construction of Wauneka’s home began in July 2011 and was completed on Feb. 10, 2012. The chapter is working with Navajo Tribal Utility Authority to have the electrical extension from her old home transferred over to the new house.

Alvarez took the initiative to get others involved and made flyers for donations and posted them in the local communities of Ft. Defiance, Window Rock and St. Michaels. She also spread the message through email and accepted an offer from the local daily paper to do a story on Wauneka’s plight.

Donations from employees at TMC, Navajo Oil and Gas, Frontier Communications and a Ft. Defiance church group made a significant impact. “We are grateful to these generous individuals,” Alvarez said. Wauneka’s new home is still in need of a refrigerator, three rugs and a dresser.

Upshaw said working with multiple entities to address the needs of the community members made the construction process a lot easier and is an approach she would like to see for future projects, especially given the limited amount of funding available.

Growing up in a household where her mother stressed helping others, Alvarez said she didn’t have any qualms about lending a helping hand. “I truly believe that Ms. Wauneka is a lesson for the community and for me personally,” Alvarez said. “We are all put here on this earth to help each other and that is our main purpose.

“Every human being is sacred and we all have more in common than we sometimes realize,” she added.

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Ft. Defiance Chapter President Ben Bennett speaks about Yvondra Wauneka’s new home and the costs entailed. Pictured are Stanley Yazzie, deputy director for Community Development, chapter coordinator Dorothy Upshaw and lead carpenter Robert Owens. (Photo by Rick Abasta)



The dilapidated home of Yvondra Wauneka was deemed very poor by the Navajo EPA. Wauneka lived in substandard living conditions for over 15 years before her new home was completed in Feb. 2012. (Photo by Rick Abasta)