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CONTACT: Candace Begody-Slim, OPVP Legal Counsel
Email: cbegody-slim@navajo-nsn.gov
Cell: 505-422-7167

Navajo President Buu Nygren disputes ‘false accusations’ by Vice President, supports investigation, calls for creation of Commission on Workplace Safety

‘Abused workers need to be heard, especially our Navajo women’

WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. – Navajo Nation President Buu Nygren today asserted nothing inappropriate, untoward or in violation of any policy occurred between him and Navajo Nation Vice President Richelle Montoya at a meeting last August, as she has alleged.

spirit of *k’é* as ‘*nali’*.” She is my *nali* (paternal granddaughter) by clan. She has never suggested to me that this gesture is in any way unwelcome or offensive to her.”

“I am deeply offended that I have been shamelessly slandered about this meeting,” President Nygren said at a press conference here today. “This has led to unnecessary confusion. The Vice President’s statement last August did not support these accusations in any way. Her stories have been inconsistent and have changed over time.”

He said he asked the Vice President to meet with him only because he learned that her marriage was ending and he sought to console her. He said he wanted to offer his support and to emphasize, given their positions, that it is important for each of them to know of important events in their lives.

He said he assured her that he would be equally transparent with her, and that he wanted to extend support.

“I put one arm around her shoulder and gave her a partial side hug to show my support for her, as I have many times before,” he said. “We have always embraced and addressed each other in the



Navajo Nation President Buu Nygren reads a prepared statement on Tuesday before taking questions from the press

Nonetheless, the Vice President made allegations before the Navajo Nation Council following the President April 16, 2024, State of the Navajo Nation Address.

The next day in a lengthy Facebook Live post on her personal page, she expressed her feelings of being uncomfortable. That resulted in both Navajo Nation Council Speaker Crystalyne Curley and the President calling for an investigation into the allegations.

“As President of the Navajo Nation, I support and welcome an independent, fair, and transparent investigation, and one that the Navajo people can have full confidence in,” the President said in an April 19 press release. “This is a unique and unprecedented situation brought forth by my Vice President, who publicly made social media statements on her personal platform that has led to Speaker Curley’s statement.”

On April 19, Navajo Nation Attorney General Ethel Branch announced that because of allegations of sexual harassment, bullying and mistreatment at OPVP, she had engaged the law firm of Rothstein Donatelli “to immediately commence a thorough and comprehensive preliminary investigation regarding complaints of impropriety,” which is underway.

On her Facebook Live post, the Vice President assured listeners she was not hurt or injured. At today’s press conference, the President asserted that nothing close to harm occurred at the meeting with her last August.

“There was no assault, and there was no sexual content or advances of any nature,” he said. “I am deeply disappointed and offended that this interaction has been taken out of context. It was only out of concern for her wellbeing. She claims I told her she could not leave. This did not happen.”

Taking a moment to compose himself, President Nygren said the comments made by the Vice President and the resulting public condemnation well before an investigation he sought is concluded was disrespectful to his family.

“It is extremely disrespectful to my grandmother, my sister and nieces, my late mother, my wife and my daughters to falsely claim that I would abuse women,” he said. “I did not disrespect the Vice

President, nor any other woman in my Administration.”



President Nygren takes questions from reporters for 26 minutes during Tuesday’s press conference

Contrary to accusations, he said his Administration is well aware that women especially have said feel unheard, unacknowledged and their feelings are unvalidated by those they seek help from.

“Many people, especially our women, have stated that they have been harassed in the workplace,” he said. “They feel that no one is listening. Men and women all over the Navajo Nation deserve better protections. They deserve a workplace that is free of harassment.”

To address this, he said he would take four immediate steps. One would be to enact a Workplace Safety Policy for the Office of the President and Vice President.

He said he would ask the Navajo Nation Council to strengthen workplace safety laws and revise the Navajo Nation personnel policies manual. Finally, he said he would create a Commission on Work-place Safety.

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– Navajo Nation President Buu Nygren

“Abused workers need to be heard,” he said. “This is especially true of our Navajo women. Many women feel that they have been the victim of workplace abuse and that no one will listen to them. I will direct the Commission to have town halls around the Navajo Nation, which I will personally attend. My role there will be to listen to the victims of workplace abuse tell their stories.”

To address the allegation that OPVP is a hostile or “toxic” environment, the President acknowledged instead that each position is highly rigorous, requiring a strong work ethic of each employee.

“The fact is, working in my office is a highly demanding job,” he said. “It requires people to make many personal sacrifices. When you look across all tribal offices, my staff are some of the first to arrive on the job and some of the last to leave. They work weekends and holidays. When it comes to work ethic, I demand excellence every day. The Navajo people deserve no less.”

He said the office employs 20 women and 10 men ranging in age from their 20s to their 70s, and all are highly educated and highly experienced.

“Let me be clear, we do not act on *jinii* (gossip),” he said. “I am only aware of two actual complaints within my office.”

One was a sexual harassment complaint made by an employee against another employee who was terminated. That case was turned over to law enforcement.

The other complaint came from the Vice President, he said.

“I have had great respect for the Vice President,” President Nygren said. “I have entrusted to her projects that are very important to me. They include chapter projects, Missing or Murdered Indigenous Relatives, a review of our customer service practices within the tribal government offices, the responsible pet initiative, and oversight over offices including Miss Navajo Nation, the Diné Action Plan, and the Diné Youth Council. I gave her these responsibilities because of my respect for her.”

In the hope to restore his professional relationship with Vice President Montoya, the President asked that she participate in the Navajo program of Peacemaking with him. Navajo Peacemaking is a traditional justice system that blends traditional Navajo customs and values to reach a non-adversarial resolution between parties.

“In order to help the people, *hozhó* (harmony, balance) must be restored,” he said. “I invite the Vice President to join me in a Peacemaking session. I would like to meet with her and a Peacemaker to address these issues. *Hozhó* must be restored for the good of the Navajo people. These false accusations have caused division, uncertainty and unrest within OPVP, at the Council and within our communities. I am proud to say that despite this uncertainty, our OPVP staff has remained focused on providing essential services to our people.”

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Navajo Nation President Buu Nygren Facebook Live Press Conference, May 28, 2024

<https://www.facebook.com/PresidentNygren/videos/1203852237626976>