

BEAUTY & DESERT POVERTY IN NAVAJO LAND

By Natalie Bussiere, SNDdeN

The Southeast corner of the Navajo Indian Reservation is a land jeweled by red mesas, pinion pines, a rocky, sandy desert floor, and in the shadow of a sacred volcanic mountain. This is home to the Navajo people, first people of the land, who lived simply for centuries, by grazing their sheep and weaving their world famous Navajo rugs. That was then, centuries ago. Now this is a place of difficult struggle for survival in extreme poverty, where some families live in dwellings without running water or electricity.



A Navajo Medicine Man and a Navajo Franciscan Brother bless Srs. Marietta Brown, Dianne Shaw and Natalie Bussiere at the beginning of the new school year.



Sister Marietta Brown assists a student at the font as he is baptized as a Catholic.

St. Bonaventure Mission in Thoreau, New Mexico is located in the midst of this beauty and desert poverty. This Mission is an oasis, a special place where Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, with other caring and devoted people from all areas of the United States, minister to God's people living in poverty. On this Navajo Land, specific ministries include providing housing for low-income families, repairing roofs, delivering water, building outhouses for those with no water, food and other much needed supplies such as blankets and clothing. Many hundreds of donors who assist us by their financial gifts provide these goods and services. Our "Outreach" department provides employment for Navajo people. The major

ministry at the Mission is St. Bonaventure School, a preschool and elementary school through the 8th grade.

A BLOSSOMING OASIS

St. Bonaventure School is also a blossoming oasis in this desert land; twelve buildings are connected by a walkway of beautiful trees and flower buckets. **Many good things happen here for our children.**

Our lay teachers, motivated and committed to serving people living in poverty, come from various States in the USA. Navajo women and men help as teaching assistants in each classroom. The Mission provides housing for the teachers because there is not any available housing in the town.

Ninety-five percent of our students are Navajo. Their parents choose to send their children to this Catholic school, rather than to schools on the reservation or to public schools, even though the children have to travel for more than

an hour on our school bus. Parents give the following reasons for sending their children to St. Bonaventure School: **our reputation for success in learning, good discipline, loving and caring teachers and especially a place where their children will learn about God.**

For every child, the day starts with prayer; religion is a daily class subject. All classes in our school participate in weekly Mass, celebrated by a visiting priest. The nearest Catholic Church or parish is 30 miles away. Most of the children are Navajo; they bring their beautiful Navajo traditions and spirituality to enrich our lives. When children and their families, or our Navajo teacher assistants are received into the Church, we celebrate their initiation with great joy.



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Students prepare their experiment to compete in the Native American Science Fair.

Annually, St. Bonaventure students enter the Native American Science Fair and compete with other native students from every Indian Nation in the US. Each year, our students capture several prizes and awards. We have a gym that is much too small, but we still manage to have four basketball teams. Our teams compete with other New Mexico schools.

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EDUCATION CHANGES PEOPLE AND SYSTEMS

“We yearn to deepen our commitment to stand with our brothers and sisters who live in poverty” (2008 General Chapter Calls). As in other impoverished areas of our world, survival is a first priority; success in school is not often considered a high priority. So we struggle to demonstrate and teach the students that education is their way out of poverty. To change systems, we work to enable the personal and academic success of our students and to encourage them to find empowerment in continuing education. We are enthusiastic and proud of St. Bonaventure School alumni/alumnae who have completed college, some from prestigious colleges in the US. One alumna, having won a four-year scholarship, graduated *magna cum laude* from Dartmouth College. Many of our former students have become successful leaders in their communities, towns and cities.



A Navajo student teaches Sr. Natalie Bussiere how to cook Navajo blue-corn-mush (tahheiel).

Living out St. Julie Billiart’s call to Sisters of Notre Dame, “to work for the poor in the most abandoned places,” SNDs have moved from Massachusetts to serve at St. Bonaventure Mission. Sister Sheila Callaghan had taught nine years at our school. Currently, Sisters Marietta Brown, Natalie Bussiere and Diane Shaw minister to two hundred plus students. Over more than 30 years, Sisters have given special public witness of **our vowed commitment as Sisters of Notre Dame and our strong apostolic commitment is to educate for life.** Students graduating from St. Bonaventure School have grown through a holistic Notre Dame education and bring this wholeness and rootedness beyond the desert of poverty. Students and parents often drum their gratitude in song and dance:

“HOW GOOD IS THE GOOD GOD”

and in their Navajo language,

“DIYIN AYO O ATE II AJOOBA.”