

'Different from everyone else'

Wheelchair-bound discuss hopes, life for those like them

BY COLLEEN KEANE
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

ALBUQUERQUE – To prevent accidents, think first!

That was the major safety message of "Altsé Baa Nisínikees," Think First Navajo, a program that aims to prevent brain and spinal cord injuries.

Several representatives of Think First Navajo, called VIPs (voices for injury prevention), who are wheelchair bound because they were injured as children or young adults, presented a workshop at the 2014 Southwest Conference on Disability that was held at Hotel Albuquerque last week.

"VIPs are actively spreading the message of injury prevention while increasing their own skills and quality of life and giving messages of hope," said Barbara Crowell Roy,

president of Eve's Fund for Native American Health Initiatives.

Think First Navajo is one of several programs of Eve's Fund, which was started in memory of Eve Crowell, who died as a result of an accident when she was in her 30s, by her parents Roy and Dr. Bob Crowell.

"Bob and I turned our tears, our grief and our sadness into action. Every time I am with our VIPs, I realize how much we have in common, because we all had to come back from some dark place," Roy told the participants in the session.

The VIPs, who are all members of the Diné Nation, include Margarita Coho, Doris Dennison, Cecelia Fred, Darlene Singer and Donald Smith.

"With all of our speakers, their lives changed in a second," Roy

said.

"On the Navajo Nation, the death rate from motor vehicles is more than three times the national average," Roy states in a brochure about Think First! Navajo.

"Most have to do with vehicular crashes, drug and alcohol use, gunshot wounds and domestic violence," Roy told the audience of about 25 people.

"One thing that research has shown is that most brain and spinal cord injuries can be prevented. That is the focus of our program, teaching young people how to prevent injuries and death," she reported to group.

The VIPs talk to about 30,000 youth from kindergarten to 12th grade annually in schools throughout the Navajo Nation.

"The reason why we do this is because we find people drinking, talking on the phone and texting while they are driving. We tell them, there is only one lifetime," said VIP Cecelia Fred, who was accidentally shot in the spinal cord when she was six years old.

"I tell the kids to tell their mom that if they see her texting and driving and they are in the car, to put the phone away and say, 'I don't want to be hurt.' And, I tell them to always wear their seat belts," she said.

Panelist Donald Smith told the audience that he was injured when he was 18 and has been in a wheelchair for 40 years.

"It is really difficult on the rez to do things that you need to do and want to do. There is little accessibility. There is loneliness. A lot of times you are by yourself because you are different from everyone else," he said.

"When this happens, it's hard to get around," said Fred. "Life is harder when you live out on the rez with no running water or electricity, no pavement, no sidewalks and a house that is not accessible, so we tell them, 'Think first!'"

Panelist Doris Dennison, who



Belinda Skeets speaks out at the Think First Navajo workshop and encourages more Diné people to come to workshops like this one. (Special to the Times - Colleen Keane)

worked for seven years to get a tribal law passed to protect vulnerable adults from abuse (called the Diné Vulnerable Adults Act) said that she advocates for change wherever she goes.

"For a person in a wheelchair who doesn't have a voice and doesn't know their rights, I try to make changes for them," she said.

Giving an example, she said, "When you go to apply for services (at a chapter house), the individual who needs the services has to come in themselves. If they can't get into

a building in a wheelchair, they can't get the services they need."

Another panelist, Darlene Singer, who was injured when she was a young adult, said that she started a support group in Kayenta, Ariz., for people with disabilities.

"I encourage my members. I support them to make something out of themselves. I tell them not to give up, become something, maybe a lawyer," she said.

The session also brought attention to injuries caused by intentional violent acts.

"I was only 22 (in 1980)," said Belinda Skeets from Bread Springs, N.M. "I was married to a man who was so jealous. At one point he said he would throw me off a bridge and kill me and then he would kill himself."

After her husband's threat became a horrible reality, Skeets recalled how she woke up in the hospital, paralyzed.

"I couldn't move, nothing. They told me 'Belinda, you are paralyzed and you are going to be like a vegetable,'" she said.

"Now he is having a happy life and I'm sitting in a wheelchair struggling," she said.

But, she added that she overcame her limitations and became independent.

"When people see me, they see me, not my wheelchair," said Skeets, who worked for many years as a vocational rehabilitation counselor. "I want to help my people so they are not homebound. They need to get out. If families got more involved and come to conferences like this one, they could get the help they need," she said.

"My dad told us not to give up," said Darlene Singer. "After I became disabled, I skied and went rafting, which I never did before. We can still do things an able people can do."

"When you are in your darkest days, talk to your friends and relatives," said Margarita Coho, who was thrown from a vehicle driven by a drunk driver when she was 16 years old. "Don't ever give up. Think about your future. You are very special people."

"For the Navajo population there are people on the rez that have issues with disability and there is a lot to be learned from coming to these conferences on what your rights are," said Joan Curtis, an advocate for Disability Rights of New Mexico.

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