

Honoring a Navajo Code Talker with a massage

**BY BARBARA
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At this year's Shiprock Marathon in early May, I was honored to meet Navajo Code Talker John Kinsel Sr. – and to give him a massage!

The event happened serendipitously and is one I will cherish forever.

Mr. Kinsel served in the 3rd Division of the U.S. Marine Corps during World War II from 1942 to 1945.

Feeling quite discouraged that I couldn't walk or run in the 2018 event because of a hip injury, I volunteered as a masseuse to help raise funds for our ThinkFirst Navajo program. I remembered how much I had appreciated the ice and massage after finishing last year's race – my first half-marathon – in 87 degrees, just days before my 71st birthday.

I met Mr. Kinsel and several of his devoted family members at the finish line, just as the first runners were coming in. He was there to greet all of the participants as they finished the race. Many of them gave him a big hug or shook his hand.

Just after the marathon winner crossed the finish line, Mr. Kinsel whispered to his son Ronald, in his native Navajo language, "In my day, I could have beaten him by at least 5 minutes."

When I heard him laughing loudly, I ask him what his dad had said and was flattered that he was willing to share his humor with me.

So after introducing myself and telling him that, along with other volunteers, I was going to be giving short massages to people as they finished the race, Ronald immediately told me that his dad had a very sore and stiff neck and maybe I could help.



EVE'S FUND, KINSEL

Barbara Crowell Roy, president of Eve's Fund, with Navajo Code Talker John Kinsel Sr. at the 2018 Shiprock Marathon.

minutes of him sitting on a chair, his son asked him how he was doing and he said, "Tell her to keep going."

Needless to say, I was not going to limit this famous Navajo Marine to a 10-minute massage. Then, after about five more minutes of neck and head massage, we realized that he was sound asleep. I was not sure how much I had helped his pain, but at least he was relaxed enough to sleep after a hard day.

Everyone else had gotten up on the padded tables to get their massages and after a little while, that is what Mr. Kinsel wanted to do as well. He really didn't need much assistance and with just a little help, he was on the table and ready for more "work" on his neck and shoulders.

His grandson recently sent me

Apparently, he had been thrown off a horse a number of years before and had hit his head. (Another reason to always wear a protective helmet while horse riding but of course I didn't say anything about that.)

What a sense of humor this legendary code talker has! When his son whispered in his father's ear that maybe he could get some relief for his neck pain, he looked right at me with a hint of a smile and said: "I don't want to get choked, but my neck really hurts."

So, for almost five more hours, 97-year-old John Kinsel Sr. stood or sat in the increasingly hot sun and greeted thousands of marathon finishers.

And I joined a wonderful group of Navajo volunteers and tried to give some relief to runners with sore calves, thighs and lower backs. Just as our team of masseuses was almost finishing up for the day, having given around 150 10-minute massages, Mr. Kinsel, joined by his grandson Ric Hoskie and son Ronald, showed up in the "health" tent looking for me. I was truly pleased and felt like I had made some new friends.

He looked tired and I was definitely tired but was ready to help him in any way I could. After a few

the picture below, with Mr. Kinsel resting on the table.

Before we said our goodbyes, I got a chuckle out of Mr. Kinsel by sharing the same story I had told some of the "older" runners throughout the day. I told him how proud I was to come in second in my gender and age group in the 2017 Shiprock half-marathon and even happier when I received the award of a beautiful hand-painted Navajo pot.

But then I asked him to guess how many other women runners were in my age group. Yes, there were ... only two.

I felt even luckier and happier after this year's Shiprock marathon. No, I wasn't able to run, but I was able to help a war hero who volunteered his time congratulating runners with the best massage I could possibly give.

And, I got to personally meet a great man and his loving family. It was truly an honor.

Barbara Crowell Roy is the president of Eve's Fund for Native American Health Initiatives, a nonprofit, community-based organization, which operates the Think-First Navajo program and provides funding for community projects such as NavajoYES.