



SPECIAL TO THE TIMES | COLLEEN KEANE

As ThinkFirst voice for injury prevention Cecelia Fred, left, listens, Jodee Dennison, ThinkFirst Navajo chapter director, reads the safety pledge to To'Hajiilee students before they were given specially fitted bicycle helmets.



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To'Hajiilee school staff and volunteers help fit elementary students with donated bicycle helmets during a special event recognizing the life and work of the late Dr. Erich Marchand.

ThinkFirst advises students: 'Wear helmets!'

BY COLLEEN KEANE
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TO'HAJIILEE, N.M. – March was Brain Injury Awareness Month. To recognize the month, ThinkFirst, an injury prevention program, on March 25 brought an awareness campaign to To'Hajiilee Community School students about staying safe at home, on roads, horses and bicycles.

According to a four-year report by the Navajo Epidemiology Center, unintentional injuries are one of the leading causes of death on the Navajo Nation.

The major forms of injuries are from car crashes, pedestrian accidents and drowning.

As part of the presentation in the school's gym, Cecelia Fred, Diné, one of several ThinkFirst VIPs (voice for injury prevention), shared with the students how she was injured.

"I wish I could get up and walk over to where you are and sit down, but I can't do that," she said, adding that she's been wheelchair bound since she was a young girl about their age.

Fred was accidentally shot when a relative was cleaning a loaded gun in her home. The bullet damaged her spinal cord.

"I didn't have fun like you kids," she said. "(After the accident) I couldn't ride my horse or go run and play anymore.

"Now, I'm 62 years old," she said. "I grew up in this wheelchair. I want you to think first what can happen to you. I want you to take care of yourself! Never touch a gun!"

The late Dr. Erich Marchand, who passed away suddenly last November, was honored at the event. Marchand practiced neurosurgery, specializing in pediatrics in Albuquerque, Farmington, Santa Fe and Den-



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Family Engagement Director Katrina Nez makes sure a bicycle helmet fits properly. The helmets were donated during an event marking Brain Injury Awareness Month. Cecelia Fred, who spoke at the event at To'Hajiilee Community School, is at right.

ver for many years.

To recognize his work as a champion of spinal and brain injury survivors, his family donated for the purchase of

certified bicycle helmets.

More than 160 students, in kindergarten to 5th grade, received helmets.

Before being specially fitted, students took an oath to wear them and remind their friends and family to wear helmets, too.

"I will wear it all the time – yes, even in the car," pledged 3rd grade student Emsley Foster.

"We always have to be prepared. A lot of injuries are very preventable," said Sarah Woody-Jackson, an assistant

to President Jonathan Nez and Vice President Myron Lizer. Woody-Jackson attended on their behalf.

"Having programs and the right equipment to make sure kids are safe is really great," she said. "I'm really glad (Think First) is reaching out to To'hajiilee. Sometimes these smaller communities get left behind."

Jodee Dennison, Diné, the ThinkFirst Navajo chapter director, showed the students a model of the brain to demon-

strate how a bicycle helmet provides protection.

"If I am riding a bike, the helmet protects the brain," she said as she placed the helmet on top of the plastic model.

Fred interjected that there are other times helmets are needed – skateboarding, playing baseball, off-roading and even wooly riding.

"Has anyone been wooly riding?" asked Fred.

Several hands shot up. She told the students about an incident that still haunts her

today.

During a wooly-riding event, a sheep bolted out of a pen into the arena where a young boy wearing a cowboy hat was standing. The sheep plunged at the boy and pushed him against the fence.

"The paramedics carried the boy out on a stretcher," she said. "Did the cowboy hat protect his head?"

"No!" the children answered loudly.

Fred said children are especially susceptible to head injuries but adults should wear protective gear, too.

"I wish bull riders and horse riders would wear helmets instead of cowboy hats," she said.

"As a parent, this is educational for me," said Visaria Apachito. "I'm going to have my children wear helmets from now on. It will give me peace of mind."

Apachito, activity coordinator for the school's Family Engagement Center, and Katrina Nez, director, organized the event.

Nez said that the program was well received and the students will be sending out thank you cards.

"Students now have an awareness of their environment, from bike riding to skateboarding, and teachers will continue to share the (ThinkFirst) message" said Nez.

Dennison, who retired from the Indian Health Service after working for many years as an injury prevention specialist, joined Think First, a part of Eve's Fund for Native American Health Initiatives, five years ago.

Fred has made numerous presentations as a ThinkFirst VIP. She conducts women's groups at the San Juan Center for Independence in Gallup and acts as an ambassador for the Christopher Reed Foundation.

Since 2005, the ThinkFirst Navajo chapter, the only Native American chapter, has reached over 50,000 Navajo children in an effort to prevent head and spinal cord injuries.

There are 171 ThinkFirst chapters around the world. Information: thinkfirstnavajo.org.