

# Turning the Page - Joseph G. Esparza

-- Gallup's 'human dynamo' lends a hand to Native Americans --

by Lisa Waterman Gray - New Mexico Magazine – October 2006

At age 68, Joseph G. Esparza has worked with American Indians, who live near Gallup, for more than 40 years. Today, he's the human dynamo at the helm of the Southwest Indian Foundation's project office.

The 38-year-old nonprofit provides emergency food, clothing and heating resources, and home repairs. It also distributes a catalogue of Indian crafts made by area Navaho and Pueblo artists.

SWIF also supports a residential facility for adolescent girls and has revived the city's old train station, where it operates a public cultural center.

At 5-foot-seven-inches tall, Esparza's energy ignites a room. Whether assessing progress on construction of a hogan-style home, talking with a Hopi family about their need for a heating stove, or discussing alcoholism treatment with a homeless veteran, he offers a warm smile and an enthusiastic handshake to everyone he meets.

"Joe was born to do this," said Bill McCarthy, SWIF's chief executive officer. "He is kind of understated and he wins people over without them recognizing it. He's humble and without guile, and he treats every human being with the same level of respect."

## **NMM: Tell us about your work with American Indians.**

**JE:** I served in the U.S. Navy from 1956 to 1960. When I was discharged, I returned to Gallup and started with the Bureau of Indian Affairs, as a typist. I ended up as an employee development specialist and retired at age 44.

After I retired, I worked as assistant manager at a local restaurant, which I didn't like, and retired again for three months. Then I realized retirement was not for me and started looking for work again.

I started with SWIF as administrative assistant to the executive director. I later became director of human services, and then the title changed to "director, project office."

## **NMM: What SWIF programs come out of your office?**

**JE:** We provide emergency financial assistance, stove installation for home heating, and home construction and renovation. We have an alcoholism program that we coordinate with AA.

SWIF also has created a transitional work facility for homeless and recovering alcoholic veterans, with the Veterans Administration, and earmarks 10 job slots for veterans who are trying to rehabilitate themselves. They receive counseling through the VA while they participate in a one-year training program with SWIF. They are encouraged to learn accountability, dependability and responsibility.

## **NMM: Describe your office's home construction partnership with the United States Air Force.**

**JE:** In July 1997, SWIF formed a partnership with the U. S. Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colo., to provide housing for homeless Navaho Indian families on traditional home sites where they have lived and worked for generations.

In 1998, senior Air Force Academy cadets in civil engineering, and U. S. Air Force Reservists from Dover Air Force Base in Delaware, built four, two-bedroom conventional homes that arrived on flat bed trailers and were placed on homesites of four very poor Navajo Indian families. In summer 2000, cadets designed and built three hogan-style two-bedroom homes. Since 1998, they have constructed 21 homes.

**NMM: How has the Navajo Housing Authority helped with housing projects?**

**JE:** In 2000, SWIF and the Navaho Housing Authority (NHA) acquired a modular housing facility in Gallup that would accommodate innovative readiness training needs of military reservists throughout the United States. Each summer, reserve units learn construction techniques and help build homes for the poorest Indian families. The NHA provides funding for building materials, and SWIF provides the work force and coordinates Reserve Unit and Academy services. Since 2000, 105 poor Indian families have received homes.

**NMM: How do you relate to the people you help each day?**

**JE:** You have to be understanding and compassionate, but firm. My greatest work challenge is to be able to meet the needs of these people. My greatest joy is the way they touch my life. We are helping people who are experiencing difficulties and can't help themselves, and taking the burden off their shoulders.

**NMM: You generally work 10- to 12-hour days, seven days a week. How do you spend your time off?**

**JE:** My off-duty hours are very rare. For 18 years I did a lot of weightlifting and I have a little workshop. I've been married for 45 years. We have two daughters who teach at the same elementary school in Gallup, and a grandson and a granddaughter. My extended family is also very important to me. There are seven out of eight sisters and six brothers left. I've got great-great-great nephews and nieces too. We had a family reunion seven years ago and 150 to 200 people came, out of about 300.

**NMM: You also play slow pitch softball.**

**JE:** I play in the Gallup Old Timers Classic Softball League, for men who are 50 and older. I play in the 50s and 60s teams and we practice all summer. I'll play any position, except catcher, and run for other players.

**NMM: What are your thoughts on retirement?**

**JE:** I have no desire to retire anymore. Working with SWIF is my life. If I'm still capable at 80, I'll continue.