Ain’t No Mountain High Enough

LATEST EDITION OF COMMUNITY PLUMBING CHALLENGE NAVAJO NATION BRINGS WATER AND SANITATION TO HOMES IN THE REMOTEST REGION OF THE RESERVATION

Story by Mike Flenniken

Lumber Garry Nez knows what it’s like to live without access to clean, running water. A Navajo who grew up in the Cornfields chapter of the Navajo Nation in Arizona, he said he did not enjoy such an amenity until about five years ago.

So when Larry Savage, the Business Agent for United Association Local 469 in Phoenix — of which Nez is a member — told him about the opportunity to help fellow Navajos living in similar conditions, he jumped at the chance.

Nez was among about two dozen tradespeople who recently assembled in the remote, mountainous Piute Mesa region on the Arizona-Utah border to deliver clean running water and safe wastewater disposal to a series of homes as part of the International Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Foundation’s latest installment of the Community Plumbing Challenge Navajo Nation program.

Nez said he had helped family members living on the reservation with small plumbing projects and repairs, but nothing like this.

“I grew up without running water and electricity, but when you see families like these with young kids around, and they get to see the water come through the faucet? I’m waiting for that,” Nez said shortly before completion of the project. “To have the opportunity to volunteer and contribute back to my people like this, and to be accountable for all the things that I’ve installed, it’s a blessing.”

CPC Navajo Mountain, held June 3-7, was the second event to be presented in collaboration with the award-winning DigDeep Navajo Water Project, following October’s pilot project in the Baca-Prewitt chapter near Thoreau, New Mexico.

More than 10,400 feet above sea level at its highest point, Navajo Mountain is the highest area of the Navajo Nation. Due to their remoteness and difficulty to reach, the homes in the Piute Mesa region are among the last in line for promised water utility service connections and projects that are commencing elsewhere in the more accessible and populated areas of Navajo Mountain chapter.

“One of the most humbling aspects of the past week has been hearing the honest and genuine responses from various family members around the households we have worked,” said Dain Hansen, IWSH Managing Director. “They’ve told us about the difficulties the Navajo Mountain community faces, and about the times they have waited and the promises they have heard in terms of being provided running water and safe sanitation down through the years. IWSH and our amazing network of industry partners are just honored to be able to play our part in helping the situation progress in this area. By continuing to work together, and combining resources and expertise, we can achieve much more.”

Volunteers connected a water supply for each house from tanks through a pump and wastewater system, and installed a gas tankless hot water system in each house. For two homes, a septic was installed and a leach field was dug.
Clockwise from top: Volunteers dig a hole for the septic tank; Lillie Benally, IAPMO Field Services Manager Jed Scheuermann and Betty Benally (in wheelchair); volunteer Michael Savage from UA Local 469; the new shower in Benally’s house; carpenter Fred Robbins; and City of Santa Fe Plumbing/Mechanical Inspector/IAPMO Board Member Ian Longacre of UA Local 412.

PHOTOS BY CHRIS SANCHEZ
The family of 83-year-old Betty Benally was among the beneficiaries. Betty’s daughter, Lillie, serves as her disabled mother’s caregiver and lives in the home with her husband, Clifford, and two children, Carleen, 19, and Dale, 12. Before the CPC, Lillie’s job of helping bathe her mother involved building a fire to heat the water, bringing in a little tub, and then having to take everything out when it was over. The new bathroom includes a shower with nearby grab handle and plenty of space for both of them.

“It’s going to be much easier here, where the water just drains and you don’t have to worry about taking it out, and just have the water running instead of having to bring the water in,” Benally said. “I think that’s a lot less stress just for me to get her ready for the day. So it’s going to be much easier.”

Another of Betty’s daughters, Anna, lives in a hogan on the property. She recently returned to the reservation after living in Cottonwood, Arizona, for about 20 years.

“It’s great,” she said of the project. “(People have) been promising since my grandparents were here that they needed running water, they were going to run the power line down, but to this day, nothing. And they’ve all

Clockwise from top: Longacre installs a tankless water heater; From left, UA Local 412 Business Manager Courtenay Eichhorst with Kamber Richards, Sasha Sun and Adam Valdez, all of UA Local 412; Plumber Michael Lavoire with Betty Benally; the tankless water heater, faucet and sink at Benally’s house.

PHOTOS BY CHRIS SANCHEZ
passed, so I’m happy for my mom that they’re actually putting plumbing in; that’s great. I’m happy for her. And my sister.”

With Anna translating, Navajo speaker Betty echoed Anna’s sentiments.

“I really appreciate it and Anna loves it, that it’s being put in for me,” Betty said. “I’m happy that it’s actually happening instead of just more talk.”

Carleen, Anna’s daughter, said it was exciting to have all of the work going on at their house.

“Not a lot of people come down this way to help us, and this is like the best moment where we could actually have help, especially with my grandmother,” she said. “It helps us a lot more. Thank you to the crew for helping us get a water supply easier than having to haul water. Heating up water, hauling it. It’s a blessing, so thank you.”

A couple miles up the road, 84-year-old Lillie Manygoats was getting water and sanitation services connected to her nearly 20-year-old house — which already had a non-plumbed kitchen and bathroom — for the first time.
Her daughter Marie, her caretaker, explained that up to now they have always had to haul their cooking and drinking water from nearby Shonto in 55-gallon barrels.

Marie also said they had been promised running water and a septic tank by other organizations and agencies in the past, so naturally they were skeptical about the CPC until they saw the work actually begin. She said it will make a big difference.

“It’s going to be much easier for my mother,” Marie said. “She doesn’t have to go to the outhouse anymore and we don’t have to haul in the water all the time. And she’s going to have the inside bathroom, which is going to be really good, and there’s going to be a shower.”

The event benefited from the support of such prominent organizations as LIXIL, Ferguson, Milwaukee Tool, WinSupply, Reliance Worldwide Corporation (RWC), and the Piping Industry Progress & Education (P.I.P.E.) Trust Fund/NITC. Additionally, four United Association of Journeymen and Apprentices of the United States, Canada (UA) chapters — Local 78 in Los Angeles; Local 400 in Kaukauna, Wisconsin; Local 412 in New Mexico and El
Paso, Texas; and Local 469 in Phoenix—sent members and/or made financial contributions.

Architect Greg Norman traveled from Australia to participate in the CPC, representing long-standing IWSH partner Healthabitat.

The day before the project began, he helped conduct a survey of the homes using Healthabitat’s Housing for Health methodology, checking about 260 health- and maintenance-related items.

“As you can imagine, some of these places had no electricity and no water, but they had fittings in some houses, so we did our best and we caught up with all the other items related to environmental health,” Norman said. “It’s because we understand there to be a very clear link between people’s living environment and their health and well-being, so there’s many aspects of that to consider. And fundamental, No. 1 on our side, is the ability to wash people, especially children.”

Norman said he rotated among the houses as needed, and was impressed by how much the volunteers were able to accomplish.

“It’s been really fabulous,” he said. “The energy of the teams is terrific; you can see the extraordinary amount of work that’s taken place in an incredibly short amount of time. There’s still things to do, sure, but it’s really been a group effort. Everyone’s helping each other out, watching each other’s backs, and it’s impressive, to really hit it hard.”

Larry Savage, the Business Agent from Local 469, was one of four volunteers from the Phoenix UA affiliate.

“I thought it was a great experience,” he said. “I’ve been a plumber for 40 years and when you see an environment like this it’s pretty touching to try to help out a family to get them a proper sewage system and a proper water system.”

Savage’s son Michael, a third-year apprentice plumber, was also among the Local 469 volunteers.

“I wanted to bring up a good apprentice and I know he’s my son, but he’s pretty independent and very well liked, very well respected, and I knew he’d be a good asset for this,” said
Savage, who also recently became chairman of IAPMO’s Phoenix chapter. “And I wanted him to see this too, what this type of life is about. I’m very proud.”

Michael Savage was happy to be able to use his skills to help people get water and waste disposal.

“It’s a great learning experience, because there are a lot of different materials that I’m using that I haven’t used in the cities,” he said. “As far as the whole experience, it’s life changing.”

He said Local 469 and his employer, Hayes Mechanical, co-sponsored his trip, but he still would have come even if they hadn’t.

“I was going to do it either way,” he said. “I was going to do it with my dad. He told me about it three months ago, and I was like, ‘Yeah, I want to be a part.’”

Randy Lorge, who recently joined IAPMO as the Director of Workforce Training and Development, attended the October CPC Navajo Nation project as a volunteer from UA Local 400 in Kaukauna, Wisconsin, where he was Training Manager at the time.

Fast forward to June 2019, and two apprentices were among the volunteers from UA Local 400. Lorge proudly pointed out that such an experience will change the way they view their work forever.

“These projects are unique, and some of the skills that can be picked up here, the variety of skilled workers that are here, masters, journey-men plumbers, from different parts of the world, sharing their skills with the apprentices,” he said. “The apprentices are picking up different ways to do things back home, and it’ll be something that they will keep with them for the rest of their lives basically.”

Second-year apprentice Sasha Sun was one of two apprentices from Local 412 out of New Mexico and El Paso, Texas. After hearing about the previous CPC in New Mexico, she had immediately volunteered for this one.

“It was awesome,” she said. “Growing up, my family was really poor and we could never afford to turn on the water and the electricity, so as soon as I heard about it I was like, ‘Oh my gosh, I can get hands on and help change
somebody’s life; I would love to do that.’ So I just jumped right in and it was super rewarding. It was really beautiful out there; I had such an amazing experience.”

Lorge applauded all of the apprentices’ effort and work.

“They jumped right in,” he said. “You almost have to hold them back sometimes, they’re so energized. That’s what happens with these things. Everybody gets here and it’s like the nitro kicks in and everybody’s ready to go. It’s such an amazing amount of energy on these jobs.”

The apprentices were not the youngest volunteers.

Jordan Young, 17, and her 15-year-old brother, Katrell, came to CPC Navajo Mountain with their grandparents, Major and Helen Tso. Major is a member of UA Local 469 in Phoenix. Working with Nez and Larry Savage, among other volunteers, the Youngs helped bring water to 92-year-old Emma Seaton, who lives with her daughter’s family and their children.

“I learned a lot out here; my mind is hungry,” said Jordan, who was set to begin her undergraduate studies at Yale University a few weeks after CPC with an eye on attending medical school. “It was really good to come out and help someone, especially coming from such a rural region, to help them get the basic
necessities that most people do have and to see how they have done it before. It’s really good to see how we’re making some changes here.”

IW SH International Program Director Seán Kearney explained that a major challenge the team faced was how remote the job sites were, in relation to where the team was staying and from where additional supplies needed to be transported.

“It’s been really satisfying for our organizing team to see how well the volunteers and tradespeople have adapted and have tackled these distances day by day,” he said. “Everyone has acclimatized so well, and it is great to see how the group have embraced the challenges of working in an area as remote as this. The team has been extremely positive and extremely proactive all week in terms of getting the work done, and facing up to any unexpected difficulties along the way.”

Kearney added the project is a clear example of how skills change lives.

“We’ve seen this week what happens when you bring talented, skilled people together — with lots of goodwill, effort and energy — to help improve the living situation for families in a tough area like this. All of those hands-on, practical, technical skills that are bought to the table here have the end result of supplying water and sanitation, and that can really change lives and living environments for the better,” he said. “Not only that, but the experience also changes the lives of the people who take part in the project. Our trades team volunteers get to see a whole other side of their profession and their trade, and leave here with a completely different understanding of their skill and realizing the importance of what they do, and what they are capable of doing, whether that’s plumbing, pipe fitting, electrical, carpentry; you name it.”

Grant Stewart, also an IWSH International Program Director, said collaboration between the roughly two dozen professional tradespeople was key to overcoming the obstacles they faced.

“The team has been great,” he said. “Everyone’s put in huge effort all around; there’s been a lot of little challenges, different ways of doing things, breakages of fittings, and things
changing along the way — all of which make a better opportunity. We had most material delivered and sponsored, which is good. A few little bits and pieces we’ve had to run to town to get organized, and a few little additions along the way to make it even better for the homeowners.”

Emma Robbins, Navajo Water Project Director for DigDeep, has been a key figure in both IWSH-CPC projects in the Navajo Nation. She said it was great to see familiar faces from October and to meet new volunteers.

“Things have been pretty challenging leading up to this one in terms of planning, but IWSH has been really great,” she said. “We met Healthabitat at the last CPC and this is my first time working with Greg (Norman); he’s amazing.”

Robbins also highlighted DigDeep’s support for a community art project for local school children from the Navajo Mountain chapter, which ran parallel to the CPC Navajo Mountain activities. The project was hosted by the Community Services team at Naatsis’aan Chapter House (Navajo Mountain) and taught participants about proper use and conservation of water, among other public health and well-being exercises. Robbins is hopeful all of the organizations will work together again.

“It’s really exciting to see things coming together,” she added. “All the partners have a lot to teach DigDeep, and I feel like we have a lot to share as well. I really hope that we can continue this work together in the Navajo Nation.”

Above: Lavoire installs a faucet at Seaton’s house. At left is IWSH International Program Director Grant Stewart.

Top right: Lavoire with Seaton’s great-grandson Christian, 3, and Abigail, 7.

Bottom right: Randy Lorge, IAPMO’s Director of Workforce Training, waits for the water to be turned on with Seaton, Christian and Abigail.

PHOTOS BY CHRIS SANCHEZ
Top: Participants stop for a group photo at the beginning of the week.

Below: Tools and supplies that were donated by companies including Milwaukee Tool, WinSupply, LIXIL, and Reliance Worldwide Corporation (RWC).

PHOTOS BY CHRIS SANCHEZ
On October, the International Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (IWSH) Foundation and DigDeep partnered with organizations including the Albuquerque-based United Association (UA) Plumbers Local Union 412 to bring improved water and sanitation facilities to 10 households in Thoreau, New Mexico, as part of a pilot Community Plumbing Challenge (CPC) Navajo Nation event.

The Navajo Nation CPC was the first time the international CPC program had been presented in the United States. As part of a follow-up CPC project in the Navajo Mountain region this June, the next step in that partnership focuses on teaching local residents to build and maintain such facilities themselves, and to provide opportunities toward eventually becoming a licensed plumber.

Shortly before the pilot Navajo Nation CPC, IWSH and Navajo Technical University (NTU), in nearby Crownpoint, signed a memorandum of understanding that created a partnership to offer community college-level plumbing courses to help people on the reservation prepare to either join an apprenticeship program or provide basic plumbing services on the reservation, said Tony Marcello, Vice President of Training and Credential Services for IAPMO.
Marcello recently led a sub-group of IAPMO’s Education and Training Committee that volunteered to come in a day before the committee’s meetings at IAPMO’s World Headquarters to help plan the syllabus and determine which materials they will need.

“It’s kind of created two different career paths,” he said during a break from the group’s planning session, “so we’ve worked with the folks at NTU to define what the program looks like in terms of what courses they need. Now we’re in the process of sketching out what those courses are going to include, how they’re going to be broken down into the individual weeks as far as the classroom content and the lab content.”

NTU President Dr. Elmer Guy said the majority of NTU’s estimated 1,800 students are in certificate associate degree programs, but the school now offers bachelor’s degrees in 11 areas of study and 18 trades programs, including electrical, construction, welding and carpentry. NTU also now offers a Master of Arts degree. While NTU’s main campus is in Crownpoint, there is also a satellite site in Kirtland, New Mexico, and two in Arizona.

Guy said there is a tremendous need for plumbers on the reservation, and the new NTU plumbing program may be the only one in the area.

“We are really looking forward to making that happen,” he said. “We look at ways of employing our students; not just to offer an education, but we want them to be employed when they leave here.”

Randy Lorge, a CPC Navajo Nation participant who recently joined IAPMO as Director of Workforce Training and Development, will help train NTU’s instructor.

“This new training course is an extension of CPC,” he said of the plumbing program. “We haven’t just gone in and done the project and left. We’ve always had some sort of an educational aspect, and so this is taking it to another level. We had a training session with some of the residents and now we’re going to a formal level of education with the school.” Marcello said this is somewhat unique endeavor for IAPMO because its training is typically code based, while this is more trade based.

“The agreement with Local 412 is that people who get through this program would be able to enter into the local there at the year-two level as opposed to starting from scratch,” he said.

Marcello pointed out that while some of the recent CPC Navajo Nation beneficiaries had plumbing facilities present in their homes, these facilities were often in disrepair to the point that they were no longer usable and, worse still, nobody knew how to fix them.

“The idea here is that at least we help equip more people on the reservation who can fix a leaky faucet or replace a toilet, or do some of this basic work to help keep some of the infrastructure they do have up and running,” he said.

From left: IWSH Managing Director Dain Hansen, IWSH board Chairman Dan Daniels and NTU Dean of Under-graduate Studies Casimir Agbaraji, Ph.D., at the MoU signing ceremony in October.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF IWSH
Guy said an educated workforce is key for building up the Navajo nation, and the nearest plumbers are typically two hours away, in Albuquerque or Farmington.

“By having us grow our own, that is the best way to meet that need,” he said. “People are here; they want to stay in the area, stay in their home, and that is why we have this school here.”

Guy said he looks forward to a positive partnership with everybody involved, and he would like to see the new plumbing program continue to expand so NTU can prepare its students in the best way possible.

“When you develop something new, it takes time to let it grow and help people learn about it,” he said. “Graduates get employed and talk to other students and more come. So when you build something good, they will come. That has been our experience. And that is what you guys do: you come in, and you already see ways to improve it. That’s what we like to see. You guys know what you are doing, so it will help us get there: to provide that level of quality.”
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