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Southern Utes revive culture, cultivate opportunity

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Ignacio - When the Southern Ute Tribe became fabulously wealthy in the mid-1990s by producing its abundant reserves of natural gas, tribal councilors still waited many years to build new offices for themselves and other tribal officials.

They held off a while on a new recreation center for members. The first big civic project under construction was a private academy, built in 2000 where the boys' dormitory of the old Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding school once stood.

That first fall day of classes marked a milestone of great importance to the tribe.

Southern Ute Tribal Vice Chairwoman Pearl Casias, 61, could not speak English, only Ute and Spanish, when she started as a day student in the 1950s at the BIA vocational school in Ignacio.

At age 14 she boarded at the Catholic Santa Fe Indian School.

"It meant one less mouth for my grandparents to feed," she says. "Those were hard times."

She grew up in a two-room house with her grandparents, a young aunt and her brother.

In the summer, her grandparents, Martha and Felipe, could sleep on the porch and leave the living room to the three younger members of the family.

When Casias was 4, her divorced mother left the Southern Ute Reservation to find work in Saguache, then Del Norte, Denver and Albuquerque. Casias says her father just left.

Stories of grinding poverty were typical. By the time Casias was a young mother in her own rocky first marriage, she managed to get some decent jobs on the reservation, although such jobs were few and far between.

By then Indian students could attend local public schools in Ignacio, a small La Plata County town surrounded by the vast reservation.

Casias' own three children were underachieving students in a social pressure cooker of Latino, white and American Indian youth in one of the poorest areas of the county.

"I knew the work, but when the teacher called for answers I was afraid to put up my hand," says Bertha Box, Casias' eldest daughter, now in her 40s. "I was so shy. But there was also peer pressure not to participate, to be invisible." She also remembers more than a few fistfights among students.

Casias says tribal members were frustrated after years of fruitless meetings with Ignacio public school officials over how to improve the Utes' educational experience.

The Ute children could keep pace until about grade 4, tests showed, but then they would begin to fall behind. And too few young Utes could speak their language, she says.

By the time her granddaughter, Springwind, was ready for first grade, the tribe, in command of vast new energy wealth, had created its own academy. It now includes infant care, preschool and grades K-6.

And Ute, forbidden in the old boarding schools, is spoken here.

"We don't just pour Ute culture over education here," says Ann Peck, lead teacher at an academy of roughly 100 boisterous yet polite students. "We pour education into the culture. The culture is the cornerstone."

Springwind says school is just "OK," but the 12-year-old's face brightens when she shows off her handsome school. She glows as she talks about her projects - from ocean studies to traditional beadwork.

Her class of 27 children includes traditional grades 4, 5 and 6, but this age group is known as Kuch, or Buffalo, strong and steady. School administrators are Tuk, or Mountain Lion, an animal fiercely protective of its young.

Box says she is aware her public school experience was not ideal, but it had its advantages.

"You did learn how to get along with different types of individuals the best you could," Box says.

Her eldest daughter, Snowbird, 20, attended Durango High School, where, she says, the teachers treated the few Indian students like anyone else. And she liked it.

But when she looks around at her little sister's private school of about 100 students, and especially the Ute language lab, she acknowledges: "This would have been good."

The tribe plans to add grades to the academy until it has a high school from which Springwind can graduate.

And, if Springwind, or any tribal member, chooses to go to college, the tribe provides a full scholarship and living expenses for any degree at any institution of higher learning.

The important thing, Casias says, is that tribal students have strong basics so they can excel at higher education. For a time, she believes, the tribe essentially purchased degrees for some of its collegians by supporting programs that lowered standards to graduate even poorly performing Indian students.

"We don't want our educations 'dumbed down,'" she says. "By the time Springwind's generation comes of age, they will be mainstream America. She will be able to accomplish anything she wants, and she will have her culture."

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