Winter 2019-2020 Newsletter

In this season of hope and gratitude, our clients and supporters are foremost in our hearts and thoughts, inspiring us to connect through the sharing of our stories.

The Evolution and Growth of a Dynamic Organization
Story by Joseph Seidenberg, Executive Director

Our world is in constant change. As a result, the work of Red Feather is also constantly evolving, based on the needs of our partner communities. For the first twenty years of our existence, we focused on building straw bale homes, with volunteers from around the world, for tribal members in need of housing. A desire to impact a larger number of families, and aspirations to continue strengthening local resilience, shifted our efforts toward providing do-it-yourself home repair workshops. While the workshops have been and continue to be well received, there has also been consistent demand for home repair assistance. This led to the creation of our Native Home Resource Network housing repair case management program. More recently, we saw the largest coal-fired power plant west of the Mississippi shutter its doors and with it, the closure of the coal mine that fed the plant and the heating stoves of many local homes. Families and tribal leaders from Hopi and Navajo nations are now urgently seeking solutions to a world without coal, not only from a heating standpoint, but in terms of tribal operating revenues. For the Hopi, that income comprised more than 70 percent of their annual budget.

Ironically, we’re back to a starting point of sorts, when our founder, Robert Young, heard about tribal elders freezing to death on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, home of the Oglala Sioux Tribe. So moved by the plight of Katherine Red Feather, he organized his friends to build her a new home, which planted the seed that would eventually grow into who we are today. Fortunately, we have had several donors and grants over the past year that have helped us develop a new DIY Healthy Heating class, an alternative healthy heating community demonstration site, and the installation of new heating systems in a handful of homes. As we look to the future, we will continue to solicit support as we expand these efforts, in hopes that all people in our partner communities have access to healthy heating options in their homes.
Of course, it is not just our programs that evolve, but our staff as well, as you will read in the stories that follow. In July of this year, I took the reins as Executive Director, after spending eight years in program development positions within the organization. My own path to Red Feather involved a deep interest in humanity, and a belief that no matter our geography, religion, political views or economic status, we are all connected and should strive to support each other as we endeavor to survive in this chaotic world.

Having worked in the remote corners of West Africa (hand-in-hand with Muslim and Christian communities) and the bustling city of Nairobi, Kenya, I purposefully found my way to the southwestern United States. It was here that I connected with our native communities, who have so many beautiful attributes and whose teachings are of great benefit to our global community. Sadly, they have also endured many injustices and traumatic hardships. Despite this, they keep on thriving and evolving as people. They are not the only native communities to have encountered such a reality.

On a recent, much-needed vacation to Australia, I had the chance to learn more about the aboriginal communities there. Facing much of a similar plight to Native Americans, such as genocide, forced assimilation and theft of their homelands, they remain resilient. I was amazed to see outside the Sydney airport, next to the Australian National Flag, an equivalently sized Aboriginal Peoples Flag. Let’s not pretend to think that having such a flag indicates all is well for Aboriginal Australians or that they live in a world free of prejudice or economic, social, and environmental injustice. However, let their flag be a beacon, reminding us that all people are equally entitled to a healthy and harmonious life.

As the year comes to a close and we soon begin yet another, let it be filled with visions of hope and excitement for stories untold. Endeavor to continue spreading goodwill to all. We recognize that many of our supporters have already donated all they can during the year, but for those who are able we ask that you consider Red Feather in your year-end giving.

If you would rather contribute in other ways, one of the simplest things you can do is share our work more broadly with your family, friends and colleagues- for as our family grows, so does our impact. And, while our volunteer programs are not as robust as in years past, you can still let us know of your interests by giving us a call or through the following link: [https://www.redfeather.org/volunteer.html](https://www.redfeather.org/volunteer.html).

Wishing all of you a peaceful and prosperous holiday season.

Respectfully,
Newest Team Member Works to Bring Warmth into Wintertime

*Story by Terry Smith, Program Director*

My name is Terry Smith, and I am the newest member of Team Red Feather. The last four months have been exhilarating, and the joy our clients have expressed to us has been genuinely inspiring.

As Program Director for Red Feather, my responsibility is to develop and implement the organization’s programs, assess needs, and ensure the program’s objectives are met on time. I enjoy many facets of my job, but what I love most about my position is that it's more than a job; it is an opportunity to change lives. My job allows me to embark on a mission to help those who need help, and, at times, fight for those who cannot fight for themselves; especially when they face the overwhelming task of working through the many levels of government bureaucracy that encumber tribal life.

At the beginning of 2019, Red Feather’s challenges were self-evident, with an abundance of families contacting us requesting assistance with home repairs. By leveraging our various resources, we were able to impact the lives of 356 Hopi and Navajo tribal members this year. We are particularly pleased to have the continued capacity to assist our elderly, veterans, and disabled tribal members. One such service was in the construction of 10 accessibility ramps. In 2020, we hope to double or triple this number.

With winter upon us, creating healthy, warm homes is one of our top priorities. We are excited to report that our heating education workshop program has been well received, classroom participation was robust and inquisitive. Over the course of three workshops we had a total of 49 students, which ultimately will impact the life of 196 family members. Our newest pilot program, the installation of solar furnaces, appears to be very promising at improving indoor air quality and reducing the burden of expensive utility bills. Red Feather runs public service announcements in print and on the radio, highlighting the importance of chimney inspections and regular stove maintenance. With many families switching to wood, due to the disappearance of coal, the risk of chimney fires has increased dramatically due to creosote build-up.

As our programs continue to expand, it is our hope that we can build upon our ability to infuse more resources back into the community economies, by hiring more Hopi and Navajo contractors and supporting more local businesses and vendors.

Red Feather Development Group is stronger than ever, due to our continually expanding community, whose members come together to donate time, resources and talent in support of our essential mission. Without our core group of community partners, donors and volunteers, our task to expand our work would be difficult indeed. It is a wonderful feeling to know at the end of the day, we made a
difference; what we do here on the Hopi and Navajo reservations matters. It is our hope at Red Feather that we are laying the groundwork for a better future for those we serve.

We give hope to those that have been forgotten, we uplift those who may be discouraged, and it is my hope that we provide light to those who sit alone in darkness. In a word, our work here at Red Feather is designed and dedicated to giving a person - or a family, "hope" for a better tomorrow.

Every day is a new beginning to make a difference in the lives of the elderly, homeless, disabled, and those who have fallen through the cracks. Our goal is to create a healthy home, and, in so doing, we can stabilize the home and in turn, strengthen the family as a whole.

Someone once said that to be truly successful in what you do, you must have a passion for your work. I genuinely believe it is our collective passion at Red Feather that will allow us to continue to be truly successful in changing lives going forward.

Bringing Respect and Compassion through Red Feather Programs

*Story by Shannon Maho, Program Coordinator*

I have known about Red Feather for more than five years, and have been the Program Coordinator for the last year. Prior to being a Red Feather staff member, I was a volunteer for small projects and during a straw bale house project at Hopi in 2014. Prior to coming to Red Feather, I completed degrees in sustainable green building and interior design, while gaining hands-on experience in the private and government construction industries. I truly enjoy having the opportunity to give back to my Navajo and Hopi tribal communities. I am proud of the positive impacts Red Feather's programs have on the families we help. The team effort that exists among Red Feather staff, and the communities we serve to develop and implement solutions for local housing needs, ensures our work has a lasting positive impact. As the Program Coordinator, my responsibilities are processing applications for the programs, coordinating projects-both big and small, and working with independent contractors and the homeowners to ensure our work is effectively implemented. I'm especially proud of our efforts to develop the local workforce by hiring skilled labor workers and contractors from our partner communities, and providing them with the support they need to be successful. I believe deeply in program efforts to provide hand-ups and not hand-outs wherever possible, by encouraging families to get involved any way they can in their home repair projects. Even without asking, many offer to prepare meals for the workers and donate craft items as part of their gratitude. Red Feather shares many stories through social media, so please check our Facebook and Instagram pages to see how our services help to build ramps, weatherize homes, repair roofs, and educate and empower homeowners to maintain a healthy home.

Red Feather regularly offers free workshops to Navajo and Hopi communities. Our Do-It-Yourself style workshops, including Healthy Heating, Women’s Home Maintenance, and Home Weatherization, are highly
popular and often have dozens of names on a waiting list. In the past six weeks we’ve completed three Healthy Heating workshops at the Hopi Sipaulovi Youth and Senior Center. These workshops focus on wood stove maintenance and safety, teach fire safety presented by the Hopi Fire Department, and provide information on alternative heating sources and on-site visits.

Here are two stories I’d like to share that highlight the positive impact of our work:

An elderly lady living on the Navajo reservation applied for our NHRN program and we were able to get her qualified for weatherization services, as well as our USDA Housing Preservation Grant that enables us to provide extended health and safety home improvements. By the end of her project, she finally had a bathroom with working toilet, and to her relief no longer has to leave her home to use the facilities at neighboring convenience stores. Before, her primary heating source was a space heater, which was replaced with a mini-split heating and cooling unit that alleviates safety hazards, spares her from gathering firewood, and lowers her heating cost. She also had a ramp built to prevent falls for both herself and her daughter, who also has mobility issues. The homeowner said, “I had applied and asked for assistance from other organizations and programs, and Red Feather was the first to knock on my door.” She was well deserving of our services, for she has raised many foster children and from the stories she tells, they are now doing well and attending college.

Another elderly woman, from the Hopi nation, recently benefited from our weatherization program but still had many outstanding home repairs that we were not able to resolve with any of our current grant sources. However, through the means of a donor-sponsored fundraising campaign, she will soon be the recipient of a mini-split heating and cooling system and an indoor and outdoor ramp for safety measures. Currently, she has a wobbly plastic step that is so dangerous for her to use, she has told us, that she doesn’t leave her home. This woman is just the sweetest. We are all ecstatic that she will be given the help and services she needs.

My experience working with Red Feather has been nothing but fulfilling. I am excited to go to work every day and often find it hard to pull away from work at the end of the day. My favorite part of what I do is visiting the families throughout the duration of their project. In the end we see how just knocking on their door from the very first visit made a difference in resolving their home improvement issues for a safer and healthier living environment. After that first visit, it’s not just a simple hello- hugs are given. At times it does get emotional for me; many of our clients are elderly and they deserve the ultimate respect and care. I am so happy that Red Feather can provide that in what we offer. Being able to go home to the Hopi and Navajo reservation as part of my job is an added bonus, and I am constantly learning who my relatives are. Now I can say I have so many more grandmothers and grandfathers.

It’s important to care and respect our elders and veterans. Respect is what I teach my children, not only for the human race, but also for nature and the environment. Respect. Kyaptsi (pronounced kep-si).
Thank you, Red Feather, for giving me the opportunity to be a part of this organization that has proven to help so many of my people. Askwali!

Sacred Hearth and Home in the Four Corners Area
Story by Roy Lee Hosteen, Four Corners Project Coordinator

My name is Roy Lee Hosteen, and I am Red Feather’s Four Corners Area Project Coordinator. I am also a member of the Navajo Tribe and reside in Upper Fruitland, New Mexico. Upper Fruitland is one of the communities that is participating in our current Wood and Coal Burning Appliance Replacement and Home Weatherization Project (WCBAR).

I began working on WCBAR in April of this year. The project is jointly funded and administered by Arizona Public Service and Southern California Edison. It’s a stove replacement and home weatherization program for low-income families who use wood and coal stoves as the main heating source in their homes.

Weatherizing a home might be simply replacing missing or cracked window glass that lets cold drafts into the home. It can also include things like applying weather stripping, replacing insulation, and patching drywall—all done to close the air leaks that make a home uncomfortable and less energy efficient. One of my primary responsibilities is to visit families in their home and provide education on how to properly use and maintain their new heating system. I do this because many of the stoves that families have been using are a simple “pot belly” design. Newer EPA-certified stoves, such as the one pictured on the next page, have advanced technologies and operate much differently.

I have seen many stoves during my visits that have deteriorated due to their age, but continue to provide service in keeping a family warm during the cold winter months. Some of the stoves are homemade and have sentimental value to the families. Nonetheless, these stoves often have defects, such as holes, that emit smoke and fly-ash into the home, causing health and safety hazards.

The experience of entering a home to install a new stove for a family is priceless. Families open their doors with a welcoming spirit and expression of gratitude. They say their good-byes to their old, faithful stove as it leaves their home. I’ve seen family members touch their old stove for one last time, as if it were another Being that helped them through the years. The contractor personnel are also moved by the family’s gratitude as they install the new stove. Once the stove is installed, a fire is built to show them how to use their new heating source.

Here are some comments from families that have had a new stove installed and their home weatherized:
“Who else would do this? I am sure thankful for the new stove and sealing where all the cold draft was coming in. Thank you so much.”

“I have noticed that I don’t burn as much wood or coal with this new stove. Thank you, thank you!”

“The new natural gas stove is a true blessing. The contractors were so polite, professional, and respectful. Now, I don’t have to bring in wood and coal, which darken my ceiling. Oh, Thank you.”

“It was certainly a privilege to be selected for a new woodstove and weatherization project. This was our Thanksgiving holiday blessing and beyond words. Our struggles and economic difficulties were considered. Zohnnie Construction personnel were professional in providing their services. Ahe’hee’, Our heartfelt appreciation!”

“The new stove is good. I like it! When I first started using it, I would get smoked out of my house. Until I learned how to use it properly… Ha ha ha. I was taught how to use the stove levers, but I was too excited to listen. It’s not like my old stove, it would get red hot and then if I didn’t attend to it the fire would burn out and my house would get cold again. Now I have a constant steady heat warming my home and the cold draft doesn’t go through my door also. Thank you to all the people involved.”

Being a community member, I have seen the need for these types of services, and really appreciate the positive health impacts the program is having in our communities. Services were delivered to forty-nine families by the end of November 2019, with many more yet to be qualified for the program. The goal is to replace 300 stoves by the end of 2021.

Any help is greatly appreciated in keeping your home safe and warm through the winter season. I applaud how professionally this program operates, serving the Native sacredness of safe home around a fire. My gratitude and appreciation for those who have a heart of giving. Ahe’hee’, Thank you.

Accounting, Wizardry, and Becoming a Better Grown-Up

*Thoughts from Delisa deVargas, Accounting & Administrative Manager*

September 20th, 2019 marked my seventh year of employment with Red Feather Development Group. It’s common knowledge that seven is a lucky number. It’s important to mention that, because the seventh-year marker is a particularly special milestone at Red Feather: After seven consecutive years of employment, we become eligible to accrue the maximum allowable number of vacation days per year. *Boom.*

Now, upon first reading, that may sound silly; or perhaps even self-serving. What a thing for the employee of a nonprofit to mention! Anyway, we’re not supposed to want anything for ourselves, right…? Well, actually…wrong. That notion is one of the common misperceptions that burden the nonprofit
industry. It’s also an idea about myself that I’ve had the amazing opportunity to unlearn while working here.

When we think about what seven years of service entails, we can see that the granting of ‘maximum annual vacation days’ eligibility’ is only a reasonable acknowledgement of the value that a dedicated employee brings. That is something that’s true for any organization; nonprofit or otherwise. For me, and for Red Feather, seven years represents a period of growth and development that has supported the transformation of many lives; my own included. The highs and lows of operations, day-to-day, month-to-month, year-to-year, formulate a potent alchemy that, ultimately, reveals not only the strengths we have acquired, but also the glittering promise of our as-yet untapped potential.

My position as the Accounting and Administrative Manager provides exclusive access to the intricate workings of the organization and is charged with great responsibility, authority and influence. I’m like The Man Behind the Curtains (The Wizard of Oz), operating the various levers and valves that keep everything going, shrouded in mystery, regarded with awe and a little bit of, well...fear. In the nonprofit world, that’s called Fund Accounting, Financial Reporting and Form 990 Preparation. Not quite as glamorous as having Wizard in one’s job title, but I’ll take it. After all, what is a wizard, if not someone who deliberately deploys a very particular and well-developed skill set with careful discernment? That’s exactly what I do.

It’s taken me a long time to arrive at this awareness. When I started working at Red Feather, I had been unemployed for eleven months, and was literally down to my last forty dollars (my unemployment benefits exhausted). Prior to that, I had worked a $10/hour, part-time, temporary job for seven months; it was the first job offered to me as my daughter and I were moving out of a domestic violence shelter (survivors!) and into HUD Section 8 subsidized housing (miraculous good fortune!) We still live there, by the way.

Before moving to Bozeman in 2008, I had worked 25 years in the construction industry for my Dad, helping him operate his fence company in Fairbanks, Alaska. I was excellent at that job, and it’s what allowed me to develop the accounting and administrative skills that have proved so valuable to Red Feather. However, I’d never had to compete for it. Job hunting was something new for me at age 47, and I did not have much confidence. I worried that I would not be taken seriously as an applicant, since virtually all my experience had been acquired while working for family.

The transmission in my Subaru had been broken for the entire duration of my unemployment, so I needed to find a job I could walk or take the bus to. I was home-schooling my daughter (who is now a home-schooled high school graduate), so I needed a part-time position that would give me adequate time to support her and minimize her “home alone” hours. The Bookkeeper position I was hired for at Red Feather was everything I had hoped for. Coming from a place of hardship, however, I was not quite sure I deserved it, and not quite sure I could sustain it. I needed just a little bit more magic to help light my way.
I’ve been a believer in magic all of my life. Just ask my co-workers—I regularly make references to *Harry Potter* (the books, not the films). Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy is my literary comfort food, I must’ve read it thirty times. Reading the *Chronicles of Narnia* as a child was life changing. And then there are Disney, and DreamWorks…and don’t even get me started on fairies! The divine magic inherent to the natural world has grounded and guided me through many tumultuous times during my adult years. But there is a very special kind of magic that happened for me at Red Feather; something different, something more tangible.

Margaret Mead put it this way: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed individuals can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.” It seems to me that those words are nearly cliché, integrated as they are into the social fabric of our times. Yet, they still hold the power of inspiration and aspiration, they are still evocative of teamwork, the encountering of adversity and overcoming it through hard work and supporting one another. Working for Red Feather has made those words real to me, transporting them from idealistic sentiment to quantitative, qualitative achievement. I have become a better person—more confident, more aware, more able to satisfy my personal and professional responsibilities. Now that, my friends, is magic.

As a contributor to or follower of Red Feather’s work, you may never have thought of “doing your part” in quite that way—never realized, I mean, that you are doing magic. But you are! That is how I experience it. Through the recording of every donation in our accounting system, I have come to recognize many, many names of our regular contributors, and I have delighted in every new and unfamiliar name that becomes part of the database. I revere and respect every grantor and sponsor who invests in the future of our programs. I hold in my thoughts a constant awareness of the need that we are working to remedy, and the joy that every fulfillment brings when we are successful. I am humbly grateful that there is so much good in the world, and that I get to be a part of it through the generosity of supporters like you. *Blessed be.*

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*Thank you for reading our stories. We hope you have enjoyed this more personalized look into what helps Red Feather thrive! We invite you to share this newsletter throughout your personal and professional networks.*

[www.redfeather.org](http://www.redfeather.org)

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