

Navajo, Hopi unity a good sign for future

By Linda Lord-Jenkins
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If Peterson Zah and Ivan Sidney had listened to 105 years of history they wouldn't have shared the podium at last week's National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) convention.

But the two men, leaders of the Navajo and Hopi Indians respectively, pushed aside history and are now working together to heal old wounds and improve the lot of their peoples. They brought their message of unity to the NCAI last week.

The Navajo and Hopi lived and shared land until the late 1870s when the United States president interfered in land matters. Since then, 13 presidents, the U.S. Congress, the federal courts and numerous lawyers have kept the two tribes fighting over an issue created thousands of miles from the Navajo and Hopi land, said Zah.

That animosity continued until the elections of Zah and Sidney by tribal members who were tired of the never-ending fight, said Sidney.

Then Zah, who defeated Peter McDonald for the Navajo leadership, called up Sidney to talk. That small effort was almost unheard of, said Zah. "Was a time when you couldn't get a Navajo and a Hopi in the same room to talk without a federal mediator," said Zah.

Now, Zah and Sidney spend a great deal of time together to spread the word of unity and the value of discussing differences.

As if to highlight their new harmony, Sidney told a joke to the delegates. "The only reason I look up to Chairman Zah is

because he's taller than I am. . . . A year ago if I said that, I'd be sued and hauled into court."

Now, the two are talking to resolve the land dispute that has been fueled by non-Natives but carried on by the tribes.

Congress appropriated money to help the Hopi sue the Navajo 50 years ago, said Zah. So the Navajo went to Congress to seek funds to defend themselves. Thus, the Congress is paying \$150 per hour to sue itself.

Those attorneys aren't pleased that Zah and Sidney are talking, said Zah, who said the suits can't be stopped despite tribal and judicial wishes. Because they were commissioned decades ago by tribal government, they will be continued, said Sidney.

In the meantime, the two men, boyhood friends from BIA boarding school, are speaking to their people to learn their wishes.

They attended every high school graduation on both reservations to speak to the young about healing old wounds.

They formerly held a joint meeting with Interior Secretary James Watt to discuss coal leasing. They have joined their political fates in a cause that may be very unpopular among their peoples. But, they say, they can only win if it works.

The land involved in the dispute has been in limbo with no roads, no schools, no hospitals because of the battle. Now, a road is being built because both tribes asked for it. More needed projects are planned.

"Just three months ago \$25

million was appropriated for a high school," said Zah.

"I always say, 'if I'm going to fight this guy, I want to do it in a nice new arena,'" he quipped.

"When we sit down and agree, that's progress. But there may be occasions we sit down and disagree . . . That's also progress," said Zah.

"Unity does work," said Sidney. "Because of unity we

survive.

"We have shown people what can be done without money. You don't need to run to court on every issue."

Sidney said unity can be used on many fronts, including areas of the BIA. Speaking of BIA staff members who may not be popular, Sidney said "maybe we should get behind them and push them in the direction we want them to go."

