

# Grateful runnings

## Thanksgiving run-walk attracts 400

BY ANTHONY FLEG  
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

**ALBUQUERQUE** — As the sun rose on Thanksgiving morning, so did a new tradition for Native families in Albuquerque. The first-ever Gratitude Run/Walk welcomed families to begin the day with a collective way of giving thanks, doing so through movement.

Running Medicine, a running/walking/wellness program in Albuquerque, organized the event, using lots of volunteers and only a \$100 budget for the entire event.

“I really enjoyed the emphasis on family and love. I could feel the love while running. It was a prayer run in the Bosque with water, earth, and sky. As a Native woman I was celebrating life, not the holiday,” remarked Jeannette Rose Stahn (Diné/German).

She added, “My nieces, 5 and 7, were so proud of themselves



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Participants wore “gratitude signs” like this one, instead of race numbers. More than 400 turned up.

for finishing the course.” The Gratitude Run/Walk included distances for all ages and ability levels to encourage wider participation than is found in

most running races.

“I was most touched by the spirit of joyful presence, gratitude and community connection by all that I saw and spoke

with during the event. From the young kiddos, to the elders, to the happy dogs and everyone in between. There was a palpable sense of excitement to come and

be together in a healthy way for a meaningful cause,” remarked Katie Shaw, one of the event organizers and a leader for the Running Medicine program.

In all, over 400 people walked and ran, ranging from 2 to 80 years of age. Participants came from as far as Tuba City and Shiprock. The event began with the large numbers forming a circle that took up an entire soccer field, giving thanks for the day and stretching together.

Fadi Ahmad, another of the event’s organizers remarked, “This event made my day. I was grateful to see how everybody bonded through running.”

In addition, a truckload of food and clothing was donated to the To’Hajiilee Community School.

“On Thanksgiving morning, I received a text from one of my colleagues stating we received a great amount of donations from the Gratitude Run/Walk. It is not every day you hear of great news especially being away from the Navajo reservation on Thanksgiving Day. We are truly blessed to collaborate with wonderful people. This holiday season, we will have

many grateful families due to the generous donations we had received for the community of To’Hajiilee.” commented Katrina Nez, Director of Family Engagement at To’Hajiilee Community School.

Running Medicine is a family-oriented fitness program of the Native Health Initiative that began in March 2016 in Albuquerque, taking a unique approach that centers on creating community through running/walking.

Core values of the program include inclusiveness to all ages and ability levels, low-cost to all programs and events, and promoting the cultural teachings and values involved in running/walking. The program works to support similar efforts that use fitness programs toward community healing and is currently working with leaders in Tsaille and other communities to help start similar fitness programs. You can find them on Facebook, through email (runningmedicineabq@gmail.com) and through the NHI website ([http://www.lovingsservice.us/running\\_medicine](http://www.lovingsservice.us/running_medicine)).

## TENANT: ‘It’s awful and stressful. We’ve called to make appointments and we aren’t being taken seriously.’ — Maggie Billiman

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she also understood that Billiman should have qualified for a lower rent payment, and was eager to get the matter settled with GHA.

To make sure the message was received, Billiman and Gregory made a second attempt the next day and walked into GHA, where, they say, they left a message for GHA Housing Manager Selina Paradise.

Billiman made more calls and was finally able to talk to Paradise in November of last year. Paradise allegedly told her she would set up a meeting with her and Gregory through a letter to go over Billiman’s situation.

Billiman says she never received a letter.

On Nov. 19, 2015, Gregory went into GHA where she left a

message for Paradise who was unavailable.

Over the next two months, more calls and visits were made until GHA finally agreed to a meeting with Billiman and Gregory.

In a meeting with Paradise in May about their income and employment status, Billiman and Gregory brought all the necessary paperwork, they said, but instead of settling things, another meeting was scheduled.

Billiman said they felt Paradise was accusing them of lying about Billiman’s disability claim and pressured them to pay the \$3,000 in back rent.

In a letter addressed to Billiman from the Social Security Administration in March of 2016, Billiman was told she qualified for retirement, survivor benefits and disability

insurance and was qualified to use it in the first week of September 2016.

Billiman and Gregory scheduled a meeting with GHA Executive Director Richard Kontz about their claims and status.

Kontz, former Executive Director at Navajo Partnership for Housing, Inc. and County Manager for Gallup-McKinley County Schools, has been the executive director for Gallup Housing Authority since March of 2014.

Kontz took over after an incident involving GHA in 2013 when then-director Danny Garcia and Michael Virruso were charged in a scheme to defraud the U.S. and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development of more than \$100,000, according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Billiman also went to the City of Gallup and the Gallup Mayor’s Office to help resolve the issue, but she was turned away after the city said the apartments on Arnold Street were private property.

Billiman then went to Gallup Police where she was told to make a statement. Billiman has not heard back from the police department.

After hiring attorney Joel Jasperse, Billiman took the case to court, along with other Diné relatives who have also had problems with GHA.

In a letter from GHA dated Nov. 21, Kontz expressed that Billiman “failed to report income in a timely fashion as required by HUD rules, regulations, guidelines, and the pertinent provisions of the ‘Dwelling Lease.’”

Stated in a repayment agree-

ment letter from GHA, Billiman will have to repay the amount of \$2,295.00 in back rent and will continue to pay her current rent without the elderly disability deduction she believes she qualifies for. If she doesn’t, the letter says, her lease will be terminated and she could be evicted.

“It’s awful and stressful. We’ve called to make appointments and we aren’t being taken seriously,” said Billiman.

In a letter from Gregory dated Oct. 3, she details previous unsuccessful attempts to schedule a meeting, going as far back as March 2016.

Also, in a letter from GHA dated Sept. 23, it’s noted Billiman made a call to GHA on May 26 to “schedule appt. due to income change.”

The letter also takes into account Paradise was not around

and she was left with voice-mails and messages of Gregory’s income change, but since there was no specific amount discussed in those messages, Billiman still has to pay the \$2,295.

Billiman’s rent was finally recalculated as she was entitled to disability since her accident last year. It will save her a small amount each month going forward, but she still owes the \$2,295 in back rent, which she says she has no way to pay.

“We kept calling and calling, now it’s not worth it,” said Billiman, who has been unemployed since her accident.

As of Wednesday, more Diné tenants were coming forward to report back rent fees and evictions.

GHA could not be reached for a comment as of Wednesday afternoon.



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