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Rug weaving leads to larger dreams/ Navajo family plan on raising organic pinon trees with rug proceeds.

By Valerie Lee

GALLUP, NM.

One Navajo family is using their artistic talent to help begin a unique business venture utilizing a skill that is relatively common among Navajo people ___ rug weaving.

Julie G. Begaye and her three daughters worked together for months creating a beautiful Germantown Navajo rug to sell.

"Proceeds from the sale of the *rug* will go towards planting and raising organically grown pinon trees on one acre of land near Fort Defiance (Arizona)." said Begaye.

"My daughters and I have woven a Germantown Navajo rug valued at \$2,500", she said. "We tried selling it on e-Bay, but all the bids were too low. I've been weaving for a long time, so I know I'll sell this rug."

And it's important to sell this rug because the proceeds will enable the Begaye family to prepare their land site for the 12 month installation of a one acre pinon tree crop.

The business venture is an entry into the United Nations Johannesburg Sustainable Economic Development 2002 Summit that calls for measurable and replica table poverty reduction demonstrations.

The experimental entry is important because it will change the organic industry possibilities on Navajo land and help other impoverished countries around the world," Begaye said.

Getting to this point wasn't easy, according to Begaye. The death of Begaye's husband [Alvin E. Begaye] in 1987 (sic) was difficult in itself. Begaye had to overcome her grief, since she had to raise five children alone on one income.

Then in 2001, a drunk driver ran into Begaye and some family members on their way home to Gallup (New Mexico) from Albuquerque (New Mexico). Begaye was critically injured and almost didn't make it. Yet, even more agonizing was the death of her granddaughter, who was killed instantly in the accident.

"My children told me later that the doctor told them not to tell me about my granddaughter's death while I was still in the hospital. My daughter had a hard time dealing with the death and she blamed herself. In order to heal, she and her family had to move away," Begaye softly said.

Begaye didn't weave for three years, yet one day, she decided to start weaving again.

"It was therapy for me really," Begaye said. "Weaving is cathartic."

So it was appropriate that Begaye and her daughters' love of weaving blended with their plan to start a business that would enable them to be self sufficient and financially successful. The family said they are excited about the next step.

"We're hoping the harvested pinons get labeled organic and then people who are in the organic preferred business will buy that produce from us," said Begaye.

For George Singleton, organizer with BRCA, Inc. carrying on this experiment on this experiment is important for many reasons.

"We've worked with the Navajo government on various projects for almost 30 years," Singleton said in an interview from his home in Indiana.

Singleton began writing grants for the Navajo Food and Nutrition in 1979. He also helped the Navajo [Food and Nutrition Service] ___ build a greenhouse that is still used today.

"There is as much poverty on the Navajo reservation as in Bangladesh" said Singleton, who cited a study by the U.S. Civil Rights Commission in 1975, that stated that fact.

"Navajo Nation; An American Colony, 1975, U.S. Civil Rights Commission" mentions the poverty on the Navajo reservation. Their poverty hasn't changed much," Singleton said.

Yet, Singleton said the Navajo people have much to offer in terms of experimental gardening and projects that will help with poverty.

That's why the organic garden project is important to Singleton,

"The technology to be used by BRCA, Inc., was first used by the Aztec and Toltec people," Singleton said.

Therefore, when Begaye and Singleton begin to plant the pinon trees, a whole different technique will be implemented.

In fact, a whole different type of soil must be used. That method that will be used to get the soil ready is called the *Sustained Agro-Forestry* process.

The process will be technical, detailed and time consuming.

"The first element is a planting bed that has two to three feet of soil, we're actually going to be putting air into the soil, by shovel and pick-ax. We'll build a 4 foot by 25 square foot bed that is two to three feet deep. We're treating the ground that way so we can grow more crops using less ground," said Singleton.

"And it works because it's been documented at the University of California at Davis under the guidance of Alan Chadwick," said Singleton.

"Chadwick brought this technique from Great Britain and from Great Britain it came from France. This technique of double digging ultimately came from ancient Egypt," said Singleton.

There is another crucial and critical element __ *vermiculture* __ which is intensive earthworm cultivation.

"It's a crucial part in creating (*humus*) top soil. That's important because the top soil has eroded away. Another thing we're going to be doing is we are going to be bringing leaves from Indiana. The kind that is left out by the curb, we'll collect 180,000 lbs. of leaves that will be used to make new (*humus*) top soil that will be mixed into the ground that is already there. Then, the *Golden California Giant Earthworm* will be put into the ground and they'll be working very hard deep down in the ground. They'll be doing the major work in turning the leaves into top soil," Singleton explains.

The earthworms work with beneficial soil bacteria and together they will make the top soil. Whatever an earthworm puts into its mouth, it obviously becomes feces. The feces is a component (of top soil) called *humus*," said Singleton.

"*Humus* is incredible," he said_ "It's a living organism. It's living soil and scientists don't know how to recreate it. It's a 'mystery' to them."

It takes a thousand years to make an inch of *humus* top soil and so when the pilgrims cut down the tree when they first came to the America, there was three feet of pure black *humus* top soil. That's why it was so bountiful to grow crops," Singleton said.

Because of the lengthy and detailed process it takes to cultivate organic crops; its price reflects the time spent on the process.

According to Singleton, the organic industry is expanding at 10 percent a year and has been doing that the last 10 years. One place, Singleton mentions, that is rocking in organic growth is California.

That's why the Begaye family and Singleton both hope this experiment is successful. And while Singleton said the return in profits by the family are years away, it will be worth it.

"It's an ambitious project but it's going to be profitable for the Begaye family. Organic pinon nuts retail for \$16 a pound," said Singleton.

Other cash crops that are being looked at to plant include: peaches, juniper berries, pinto beans and the yucca plant.

The main problem is finding seed money, no pun intended," said Singleton. The total cost to set up the one acre garden is \$430,000. Singleton admits that it is a lot of money, but believes the experiment will continue as planned.

"It's going to be a beacon for other Navajos who want to stay on their reservation and not have to leave to find work," said Singleton.

For now, the Begaye family is looking forward to creating healthier products and finding financial success. And they hope the experiment is a success because it will mean jobs for Navajo people who want to embark in the organic crop business. It'll also mean Navajo people will rely on themselves, rather than the government.

"We want to show other Native Americans you can use the land for better things," said Begaye.

"I want to share this story because there's always hope in anything," Begaye added. "Like this project, I couldn't do it right then and there. I had to put it aside for a while. How I can focus on the project and hope it works out. There's always hope."

"I know my children will carry this on," she continued.

BRCA, Inc., is based in Indianapolis, IN. and is responsible for delivering the *Sustainable Agro-Forestry* technical assistance to the families who want to partner with them in an organic crop growing experiment which the Begaye family is participating in. It is a member of the State of the World Forum (SWF), Member # 20827.

The SWF is a group that was "founded in 1995 with the purpose of working with partners worldwide to gather together the creative genius on the planet in a search for solutions to critical global challenges" according to their www.worldforum.org mission statement.

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