



DOCUMENTARY FEATURES THE UNTOLD STORY OF A NAVAJO FAMILY

By Graig Uhlin Arizona Daily Wildcat U. Arizona

(U-WIRE) TUCSON, Ariz. -- Amidst all the independent voices heard at the Arizona International Film Festival this weekend, one told a tale of love, hope and injustice.

The documentary film, titled "The Return of Navajo Boy," narrates the story of the Cly family - their reunion with an estranged family member and their adversities with the hazardous uranium mines of Monument Valley where they live.

"The film was about giving the Cly's a voice," said co-producer Bennie Klain. "They had been portrayed by outsiders for so long."

Director Jeff Spitz discovered the Cly family is among the most commonly photographed groups of people, appearing on postcards and films relating to Monument Valley. These photos, however, "never identified the family and the family never spoke," Spitz said.

"The Return of Navajo Boy" originated with a film made around 50 years ago in Monument Valley, simultaneously as John Ford was filming his westerns with John Wayne.

Titled "Navajo Boy," the docu-drama ran 28 minutes with no sound, and featured the lifestyles of the Navajo people - people who were later discovered to be members of the Cly family.

The film was sent to Spitz by the son of movie's director. Spitz became intrigued by the film and was determined to tell the story of the people in it.

"If these people could speak I wondered what they'd say - not in the film, but what they would say about the camera and being filmed," Spitz said.

Spitz intended to portray the family differently than other documentaries that exploited the family's image.

"They were very stage-y, expository documentaries about a very specific facet of Navajo culture," he said. "It was always silent people who were being described by a white narrator."

Spitz said the film gives a voice to those who previously had none, and when the Cly's did start speaking, a touching story surfaced.

Elsie May Cly Begay, featured in the film and was in the original "Navajo Boy" movie as a child, told a story of her long-lost brother John Wayne Cly - named by the movie star himself while filming - who was taken from her family by white missionaries after their mother died.



The boy had never known his own family, but after reading an article about the return of the "Navajo Boy" film, he contacted the filmmakers. Spitz then documented the reunion of a family torn apart.

"The one thing that resonates with me is the chain of events that happened after the old film turned up," Cly Begay said through an interpreter, referring to John Wayne Cly's return. "It teaches people the value of not giving up hope because something this extraordinary has happened."

The tale of this reunion is meant to remind viewers of the importance of communication, family and maintaining the traditional Navajo culture - values upheld by the local community organization Navajo Network.

On invitation, Elsie Mae Cly Begay and her grandchildren accepted an invitation to a potluck hosted by Navajo Network, an organization of Navajos that encourages students to stay in school, held yesterday at the American Indian Studies Graduate Center.

Cly Begay said the event allowed her to put a human face on Tucson and to meet other Navajos. She also met a girl who was an extended family member.

The film also documents the adversities the Cly family has faced as a result of the uranium mining of Monument Valley.

Bernie Cly, who used to work on the mines, is currently suing the U.S. government for monetary compensation, but the government is refusing payment. According to Spitz, there has been a lack of communication on both sides.

"With the film we can educate more people and shed light on our situation," said Cly Begay. "We can get a reaction from people who are able to do something about it."

While in Tucson for the festival, Spitz searched the photo archives of the Arizona State Museum for additional documentation of the Cly family. Klain said any additional material found would be used to add five minutes to the film - qualifying it for broadcast length on PBS, but none was found.

"The Return of Navajo Boy" will air on PBS later this fall.

© 2000 Arizona Daily Wildcat via U-WIRE