

Film breaks down barriers surrounding uranium legacy.

Gallup Independent

By Kathy Helms

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COVE, Ariz – Somewhere around Mitten Rock, just before Cove Chapter House, a light snow started to fall Thursday and was whisked away by high winds whistling through the mesas. Lee Begay stood outside the chapter house warming his hands on a cup of coffee.

From the sidewalk it was easy to spot the telltale signs of uranium mines sealed with foam and concrete to prevent their toxic legacy from escaping the mountainous tombs. With winds gusting up to 40 miles per hour, any loose tailings were surely being blown to hell and back, as has been the case for nearly 70 years.

Cove's largest uranium producer, the Mesa No. 2 Mine, wasn't the only one in the area near the chapter house, Begay said. Pointing with his lips toward a mesa just over the hill, Begay said there used to be a uranium mine there, too, where his father worked. "I was born underneath that mine. That was back in 1950."

Begay doesn't know how to spell his dad's first name, but what he does know is that his dad worked at that mine, and at Mesa No. 1 and 2 mines, and down at the Oak Spring mine.

"He worked about three or four years, both as a miner and a miller" and eventually died of cancer. "My older brother passed away, and my sister, and my younger sister. They passed away from that cancer," he said.

He has tried twice to request compensation for his dad's illness under the federal Radiation Exposure Compensation Act but has been turned down. New amendments proposed for RECA could help, as far as being able to combine his father's work history and use affidavits to support employment claims.

"These people don't know what's going on. They don't know where our parents worked. They just want all kinds of documents. I tried, but this will be my third time and they told me no more after that one," he said, because of the federal government's "three strikes, you're out" policy.

He is not the only one frustrated with the government and its lack of attention to the uranium legacy over the last 40 years.

Mary Helen Begay of Oljato, who was in Cove for the "Community Uranium Exposure – Journey to Healing" health screening last week, said there are several mines in the Monument Valley area that were never cleaned up. "The only one that they got to was over at VCA (Vanadium Corporation of America). They disposed of the uranium materials in Mexican Hat area."

Mary Helen is married to Lorenzo Begay, the son of Elsie Begay, a central figure in “The Return of Navajo Boy,” a documentary co-produced by Navajo language expert Bennie Klain and Jeff Spitz of Chicago.

“Mary Helen Begay was one of my first teachers at Navajoland,” said Spitz. Now, she is using a flip camera to document the cleanup of Skyline Mine in Oljato and the contamination around their homes.

Spitz was invited by Indian Health Service and asked to work with the Begay family to use the film to engage Navajo residents in Cove and other small communities that have been impacted by uranium mining.

“I know from my experience in Chicago and across the country with this film, it breaks down all barriers,” he said. “It's honest and it's raw, and the emotion is extremely effective in waking people up. It's something I think of as a Trojan horse.

“It's a gift of a movie, but what climbs down out of the horse and into the hearts and minds of people is the history of one Navajo family that has become emblematic of the rest of the Nation as they come to grips with Cold War uranium contamination.”

Mary Helen spoke recently with Brian Milton, a contract worker responding to the cleanup in Elsie's back yard. In the filmed interview Milton told her they are spraying soil stabilizer that “puts like a pie crust over the soil to keep it from blowing.” He said it is a temporary measure that should be good for about a year.

“I'm hoping they're going to dispose of the uranium that they collect from my mother-in-law's back yard elsewhere, not bury it there on-site again, because uranium is a radioactive heavy metal,” she said. “Anything that's found around the area – the soil, the groundwater, air, plants, even the animals are exposed to this uranium.”

Mary Helen doesn't know whether the uranium area in their back yard caused her two brothers-in-law to pass on, “but one died of lung cancer, one died of a head tumor. Our children have been playing there all their lives. Our grandkids are beginning to grow up. We don't want them to be contaminated by that site anymore. It's been there too long,” she said.

The cable from the trolley that ran up the mountain to Skyline Mine is still lying in Elsie's back yard. Several rocks in the same area close to the cable are highly radioactive, Mary Helen was told. She is not happy with the temporary “pie crust” being sprayed to keep the dust down.

“We've been exposed to it already. They just need to get rid of it. It's just extra money I feel like could be used somewhere else,” she said. Elsie had surgery for thyroid cancer last year. One of her daughter's also had thyroid problems.

Mary Helen said her sister had to have “that radioactive treatment” for thyroid problems. Her father, a miner at the Moonlight Mine, was diagnosed with lung cancer. He passed away in 1999 during the time “The Return of Navajo Boy” was being filmed.

“Prior to that, my mother-in-law's mother and grandmother, they both died of lung cancer. That's where John Wayne Cly – Elsie's brother – the baby they mentioned in the movie, was adopted, because both grandparents had died of lung cancer and had no one to care for him,” she said.

Spitz didn't start out in 1997 to make “The Return of Navajo Boy.” The journey began when he tried to help a Chicago man, Bill Kennedy, find the people in a film made by Kennedy's father, “Navajo Boy,” so he could give it back to them. Neither man knew any Navajos.

“During the time I was researching, I learned that the people in his father's old movie were probably still alive and were probably getting their mail from some exotic place called Gouldings, and that if I went to this trading post I might be able to show people pictures and find the ones who are in his movie,” Spitz said.

He went to Gouldings without knowing what to expect. The rest of his journey resulted from meeting Elsie, Lorenzo, Mary Helen, and Jimmy Cly, better known as Navajo Boy.

“Most importantly, I think, it comes from Bernie Cly telling me on a long trip in his pickup truck all about the family's journey toward healing. It was a sad story because he himself had had a lung problem and had to have surgery. Other men in the family had had these problems and the medicine men were no longer able to cure these problems,” Spitz said.

“I had never heard that uranium was in this area. I had never heard that Navajo men were working in uranium mines, and I certainly had never heard that this country had exposed all of these people and done so with the understanding that they were working in an extremely dangerous industry. I felt that as a citizen, it was my responsibility to try and work with one family to try and get that story told.”