

Navajo teen hopes to save himself and his community

By Joline Gutierrez Krueger

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ALAMO BAND NAVAJO INDIAN RESERVATION — Timothy Apache might have died young were it not for the nosebleed.

More likely, though, the 16-year-old would have died, but slowly, through decades of diabetes ravaging his organs, his sight, his nerves.

He would have stayed angry. He would have stayed isolated, shunned by the kids who, while pudgy themselves, taunted him for being so obese and so alone.

The Alamo Band Navajo Indian Reservation where he lives is perhaps New Mexico's remotest community, cloistered by miles of windswept badlands and merciless mountain terrain southwest of Albuquerque, where only one good road goes in and out.

Here, half the homes have no phone and the nearest grocery store is 30 miles away.

Here, alone somehow feels lonelier.

"He'd come home sad. He told me the kids were picking on him," Dolly Secatero said of her only child. She could not help him. A part of her didn't know how; another part didn't want to.

He was a daily reminder to her of his father, who died in a crash the day he graduated from college. She was four months pregnant.

Timothy J. Apache Jr., T.J. for short, named after the father he would never know, was born into her emptiness.

She sent T.J. to her parents while she grieved and worked the low-paying jobs a woman with little education in the middle of nowhere could find.

But her mother died when T.J. was 2. Her father succumbed three years later. Motherhood came to her whether she wanted it or not.



For T.J. Apache, 16, the new wellness center on the Alamo Band Navajo Indian Reservation offers hope in his struggle to get healthy and feel good about himself. Like many teens on the reservation, T.J. goes to the center every evening to play volleyball, socialize and have fun. Like many American Indian teens, he suffers from obesity and diabetes.

"I didn't really pay attention to T.J. back then," she admits.

T.J. started putting on weight early, and perhaps that's not surprising for someone who had lost so much.

He reached 300 pounds in middle school, his diet consisting mostly of commodity cheese, canned meats and fried foods. His weakened eyesight forced him to wear glasses thick as ashtrays.

He was tired, depressed, angry. His mother said he had no friends.

"He had a short temper," Secatero recalled. "He's always been like that."

Then came the nosebleed when he was 12, and she learned that his weight was more serious than her troubles with finding him large enough clothes from the Wal-Mart in Socorro some 64 miles away.

"I didn't know they had taken him to the clinic, but I guess when he was there they tested his blood sugar and it was 400 or something," Secatero said.

"That's when they tell me about the diabetes."

Normal blood sugar for a teen is between 90 and 180. The clinicians diagnosed T.J. as dangerously diabetic because of his excessive weight and the damage already done to his eyesight and his emotional state.

Clinicians also deemed him chronically depressed and they worried that in a few short years his diabetes would worsen should he start drinking like so many others they had seen on the reservation.

Family members here describe those who descend into the hazy Bud Light ether as being "around."

It was, many feared, only a matter of time before T.J. would be "around," too. Or dead.

But several dedicated clinicians decided they weren't going to lose T.J. without a fight.

They knew that underneath all his pain and his anger and his prison of a body was a gentle, endearing kid with a sly sense of humor and a will to be well.

"There was this wonderful glimmer of potential in T.J.," said Alamo nutritionist Liane Adams, who commutes weekly to the reservation from her Albuquerque



The school bus arrives at 7 a.m. to pick up T.J. and his cousins. Like many other students, they arrive early for the school's free breakfast.



After watching afternoon TV, T.J. Apache walks next door to his cousin's home for a ride to the local wellness center. The new facility offers the 16-year-old, who suffers from diabetes and obesity, a chance to play volleyball, socialize with friends and get exercise.



T.J. (left) takes a moment to write his e-mail address on the hand of friend Judith Secatero on his way to first-period class at Alamo High School.

home 160 miles away. "He just needed a chance."

In saving T.J., they were saving something more.

Alamo, with a population of a little more than 2,000, also struggles with obesity and depression. Diabetes curses more than half its residents, Adams estimates.

"T.J. could become a powerful role model, not just for his immediate family but for others in Alamo," Adams said. "They would see what can be achieved through education and self-discipline and reaching out."

But if T.J. was to be a symbol of hope for his community, the clinicians realized he would have to leave it.

Help, elsewhere

T.J. shows us an arroyo near his home, its red-dirt walls crumbling into a wide crevasse that hasn't seen water in hundreds of years.

"This is where I go to be alone," he says in a voice softer than his gentle giant stature would suggest.

Privacy is hard to find in the small three-bedroom home where he lives with his mother and her sister Loretta Apachito, Apachito's four teenage daughters and 7-year-old son. Two other children are grown and gone.

Apachito's husband is "around," she says.

T.J. shares a bedroom with his mother and the 7-year-old. Other family members sleep on torn couches in the living room, where one broken window is covered by a board and a washing machine whirs loudly.

He needs this arroyo.

Clinicians say he needs something more. And soon.

"It almost feels like we're looking at a last resort," Adams said.

T.J., who stands about 5 feet 6 inches, swears he has done everything the clinicians have taught him to maintain his diabetes and to lose weight for nearly five years. Still, his weight hovers at 350 pounds.

"I try to walk a lot," he said. "I try to eat better. It's hard out here."

SAVING T.J.

To support the effort to send T.J. Apache to Academy of the Sierras or for more information on childhood obesity, contact Louie's Kids, P.O. Box 22693, Alexandria, Va., 22304 or www.louieskids.org.

INDIAN ISSUES

Obesity in Navajo children has tripled in the past 20 years.

American Indians are 420 percent more likely to die from diabetes than other populations.

They are 770 percent more likely to die from alcoholism.

Depression is the most serious emerging health disorder among American Indians, but only 101 mental health professionals are available per 100,000 American Indians. That compares with 173 per 100,000 whites.

New Mexico has the second highest population of American Indians in the country.

Sources: Navajo Area Indian Health Service, 2005; "Closing the Health Disparity Gap in New Mexico," Con Alma Health Foundation, May 2006.

Nutritionist Adams understands.

"All my discussions on eating fresh fruits and vegetables fall on deaf ears," she said. "You can't buy those things easily when you live out here. There's no Whole Foods. It's so much easier to drive 30 miles to buy soda pop and potato chips and bologna."

Stay a little while at the Trails End Market in Magdalena and you might think Cheetos is an Alamo mainstay.

So Adams began surfing the Internet.

She found the Academy of the Sierras, the nation's first boarding school for teens struggling with weight and emotional issues.

"This seemed like the perfect solution for T.J.," she said.

Well, maybe not so perfect.

Cost for the school, located near Fresno, Calif., runs \$5,800 a month, far beyond T.J.'s means.

There are no scholarships.

So Adams searched the Internet once more and found Louie's Kids, a nonprofit group in Virginia that raises money to send obese children across the country to weight-loss camps and programs like the Academy of the Sierras.

T.J. is the first in New Mexico the organization has tried to help.

"Timothy is in need of an intervention," said Louis Yuhasz, who founded Louie's Kids three years ago in memory of his father. "It's going to take more than a conventional weight-loss program to deal with a kid his size and with his emotional and psychological luggage."

By telling T.J.'s story, Yuhasz said he hopes enough money can be raised to send T.J. to the academy for at least nine months.

"At the end of all this, what I'd love to see happen is for Timothy to be able to address his dire health needs and in turn bring light to the scores of children with the same issues of obesity where he's from," Yuhasz said.

It hasn't been easy for T.J. or his mother to tell their story. But in the weeks since they have, that "glimmer of potential" Adams first noticed is just a bit brighter.

The angry boy who dropped out of school momentarily last May because of the ridicule and the weight is not so angry, not so alone.

Getting there

T.J. smiles at the other teens walking the hallways of the Alamo Community Wellness Center, a \$2.4 million facility that seems almost surreal in such a far-flung community.

The center, which opened in June, is gradually becoming a community focal point, especially for Alamo youth who before then had few other places to gather.

The teens smile back.

"Hi, T.J.," one says.

"Hey, T.J."

In the efforts to save T.J., T.J. has begun to save himself.

"It's been an amazing thing," Adams said. "He's begun to blossom. He's sort of a celebrity now."

His mother has noticed.

"He always comes home happy now," she said.

Even the Alamo Navajo School Board, a powerful entity that oversees far more than the school here, has given its blessing on T.J.'s efforts to leave the reservation to attend the academy, should enough money be raised.

"That's huge, unexpected," Adams said. "That means the community will be behind him."

T.J. comes nearly every night to the wellness center to play basketball and volleyball, to hang out with friends, far from his arroyo.

He imagines that it could be like this at the academy.

He imagines himself well.