

2020 Local story # 5: ‘Turquoise Man’ talks senate run, virus response

Written by By Cody Begaye Sun Correspondent
Friday, 08 January 2021 08:27



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A Rock Springs man known for his sand paintings is set to make a run for the District 3 State Senate seat.

Shawn Nelson, who has carried the moniker “Turquoise Man” since his youth, spoke with the *Sun* May 12 about his plans for the district as well as the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the region.

“I want to recognize the people who are on the frontlines, like nurses, hospital staff, doctors, the police and fire departments, and anyone else helping with the community efforts to protect people,” Nelson said.

Nelson also wanted to state his clans as part of his introduction, which are Dibéłzhíní, Kiyaa’áanii, Honágháahnii, and Táchii’nii.

WHO IS DOING WHAT?

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In a recent press release that was distributed to local newspapers, Nelson asked why the COVID-19 outbreak is having a disproportionate affect on people in and around McKinley County compared to the rest of the state.

He also had a theory for why that is.

"One reason obvious to me [for the spread] is that there is not enough cooperation among the local governments," Nelson said. "It's being said the government and tribal members and the new mayor all had different schedules or time frames, which was confusing."

Nelson pointed to the recent lockdown of Gallup to outside visitors as part of this lack of communication and coordination.

"I believe this happened because the governments are not communicating and planning together," he said.

In addition to slowing the spread, Nelson said the public should be educated on why the virus is widespread in the region, as well as what the virus statistics means for the people.

"The politicians announce the curfews and lockouts, but we do not hear from health professional[s] about exactly what the steps taken are expected to accomplish," he said.

Nelson also cited a need for transparency from the local governments. He mentioned how the Navajo Nation is set to receive about \$600 million to help fight the virus, but any specific plans were not discussed by President Jonathan Nez, who spoke about how the funds will be used for infrastructure and water development on the reservation.

"But that is in the future. How is the Navajo Nation going to work with New Mexico and Gallup to stop the virus now?" Nelson asked.

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Nelson said the Navajo Nation Naabikiyati Committee will assist Nez to make sure the Health Command Operation Center will be making the most of the funds it has received to combat the virus on the reservation.

GOALS FOR RUNNING

Nelson said as part of his run for District 3 State Senate, he has five concerns in the region he wants to address.

The first is climate change.

"I did a painting of things that relate to Mother Earth and things that are being destroyed to show [what has to be done]," Nelson said.

To that end, he completed a number of paintings showing the impact climate change will have on people now and in the future. One of the pieces, he said, was even bought by a congressman in Washington, D.C.

The second issue is education.

"We need to share with the youth what education does for themselves and everyone else around them," Nelson said. "We have to show them you have to have some knowledge to relate to others and to understand what they're about."

The third issue is health care.

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"There are a lot of issues with it. You don't know which hospital you can go to when you have to, so you just have to have some things prepared," Nelson said.

The COVID-19 pandemic has given extra reasons to be careful, he added.

"A nice thing about the being careful was I had the opportunity to complete my medical assistance program and understand what I can do in relation to the virus," he said.

This involves protecting himself from germs and keeping his distance from others, which Nelson said in the press release he has seen other people starting to do more often as well.

The fourth issue is social justice.

"We do make mistakes as humans, but we have to be aware of the rules and the law," Nelson said. "There are issues about justice that have to be shared and keep people aware of."

As part of this goal, Nelson also emphasized listening to tribal leaders and health experts on how to minimize the risk of spreading the virus.

The fifth issue is job creation.

"You have to look at the future, and you have to have social security benefits," Nelson said, recalling how he started working when he was nine years old and has not stopped since.

WHY THE RUN

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Nelson said it was sad the New Mexico Legislature had the opportunity to send funding to the City of Gallup, but no such funds were received. He cited the lack of funding for the library as being a hurdle the city has to overcome.

"It's sad we have people that are working here, have opportunities here, but don't have support of their state," he said.

This was another concern that helped Nelson decide to run for the senate seat.

"We need to get [the] attention of the state legislature," he said.

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