

Local artisan Lyndon Tsosie holds stamp retreat

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Lyndon Tsosie, local and internally renowned Navajo artist, held a retreat “House of Stamps,” the last week of June, for budding and experienced jewelry makers to learn about the art of Navajo stamping and to create their own masterpieces.

The Navajo silversmith stamping tools are handmade, and the stamping faces look clean and crisp, from 2 7/8” to 4 1/8” long.

Back in the day, Native Americans were resourceful, and made their tools from all kinds of found objects, such as rebar, old files, rasps, railroad spikes, and valve stems.

Artisans hand cut and file the patterns onto the face of the shaft. It’s one thing to be a great silversmith, but it adds a whole different level of skill when you are also making your own crafts using these stamping tools.

Tsosie launched the House of Stamps program about two years ago. They sell to about 25 countries and have a following of non-native jewelers from around the world who love the stamps.

The retreat was held June 26 - 30, with five participants from all over the country. The cost of the retreat was \$2,600, which included hotel accommodations, meals, and classes to learn about the stamps. Tsosie, along with two instructors held the retreat at the Gallup Downtown Conference Center with classes beginning at 9 am.

“This class is the first annual with participants who come from all over the United States; who are members of the House of Stamps club,” Tsosie said. “We have about 2,200 hundred members and five of them choose to come to this retreat to learn stamping, and feel what it’s like to use the stamps. The classes included working on projects such as a riveted bracelet and pendant that the participant will get to take.”

“We teach them the history of the stamps, how they came to be known as “Navajo stamps” and

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how the Navajos use them in their jewelry, from 1850 up to today,” Tsosie added.

Along with Tsosie, two other instructors from Minnesota and Missouri came down to be a part of the Lyndon family.

Instructor Karen Ritsche of St. Paul, Minn., who started buying the stamps online a year ago, was intrigued with the feel of them and wanted to get the full experience of Navajo stamping. Ritsche who has her own company, Starlite Crystals & Reiki, loved the whole experience.

“The feel of these stamps are energetic and absolutely dynamic and the integrity and character of the company was something that I respected and I wanted to help with this retreat,” Ritsche said. “It’s a learning experience and we all learn a lot from each other and I (would) love to do it again at home on a smaller scale. This is the most fun I had in a long time, being here in this part of the country ... everyone has been so friendly. I love it. It’s a learning experience and we all learn a lot from each other and I love to do it again at home on a smaller scale.”

Beth Witte, of Bland, MO., also came to help as an instructor, started buying stamps about two years ago. She uses the stamps as therapy, and says the connection of the feel of the stamps was a good spirit and the symbols of the stamps are ancient that connect with one’s soul that will helps transform her work.

“I just want to get these stamps into others hand and see what they can do for others,” Witte said. “I wanted to learn more and especially from an artist such as Lyndon, it has really opened my eyes ... it’s a really great product and everyone has been so wonderful. I really don’t know why I jumped on board with this retreat but I knew I just wanted to.”

Participant, Ginny Elliott, of Van Buren, AK., got involved with the retreat to learn more about these unique stamps. Elliott, who is a Kindergarten teacher had been buying stamps as a hobby wanted to learn more about the stamps. Having worked with letter stamps and necklaces found this type of stamp fascinating.

“When they posted it online I knew immediately I wanted to be a part of it, I had some work with

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stamps but doing more designs with these has been wonderful and the learning has been great,” Elliott said. “How the stamps make you feel and if you get a chance to participate in it you should, the working of them and learning of the Navajo culture is great, it has given me growth personally.”

Julie Teeples, of Cortez, Colo., heard about it online and found the House of Stamps as she was searching for supplies, and started watching Tsosie on YouTube demonstrating his stamp work. Being a professional artist herself, Teeples found this as a whole new medium, being only several hours away she hopes to visit House of Stamps more often.

“It was amazing to see the work and get first hand ... it was something that meant a lot and that is why it brought me here,” Teeples said. “I used to tool leather work and now I do silversmithing and I wanted to hone in on Navajo stamps, and this is just great. It’s wonderful and this week has gone by so fast that I am going to miss it and it has been a great feeling.”

Teeples said she plans on making more trips to learn from Tsosie.

Tsosie will be holding a semi-annual stamp retreat or four retreats a year. Next one will be in October slated for 10 participants with two spots open.

For more information on House of Stamps, 310 Mesa Ave, Gallup, House of Stamps/House of Lyndon Gallery at (505) 399-1894.

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