

Fairgoers came 'together as one' to crown a new Miss Navajo Nation

Written by By Dee Velasco For the Sun
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Once again, the Annual Navajo Nation Fair was a wonderful event to attend and be a part of. This year's theme was, "Let us come together as one: Through Ke' we are strong." Ke' means clanship.

Along with families enjoying fun and excitement, the 70th annual fair was filled with anticipation for the crowning of the 2016-2017 Miss Navajo Nation on Sept. 10.

The 2016 coronation was held at the Dean C. Jackson Memorial Arena in Window Rock, Ariz. A packed house waited for three and a half hours to see who would be the next Miss Navajo Nation.

Before the coronation began, the crowd was treated to a cultural showcase of various Native tribes performing in lieu of "Cultural Night."

"It's a night of displaying cultural dances, songs, and related items to the theme, as we also will be displaying more Navajo base dances," Coronation Coordinator J.T. Willie said.

The audience was captivated by performances from the White Eagle Dance Group of the Pueblo of Zuni; Hopi Dance Group of Polacca, Ariz.; the Apache Crown Dance Group of White River, Ariz.; among others who danced during Cultural Night.

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Willie, who's been involved with the dances for the past seven years, said he was glad the coronation is back at the rodeo arena. Willie was also one of the judges in this year's crowning.

"The judges and the contestants have been so busy this week," he said. "They went through a whole week of contests — there were a total of eight women from the surrounding Navajo Nation area."

Willie judged "contemporary talent," the only contest in English.

"Everything else was done in the Navajo language," he explained. "They even had to butcher a sheep; it's the only contest that is based on cultural [tradition], thus preserving [culture] for the past sixty-five years with Miss Navajo."

This year's contestants all hailed from Arizona. Kaylee came from Begay-Chinle, Ariz.; Ronda Joe, Rock Point, Ariz.; Deidra Wilson, Nazlini, Ariz.; Alissa Copi, Red Rock, Ariz.; Shannon Gorman, Chinle, Ariz.; Mariah Claw, Chinle, Ariz.; Atheina Claw, Chinle, Ariz.; and Rodina Jordan, Oak Springs, Ariz.

As the performances wound down, the audience made a wave across the entire arena as the last of the performers sang a Sway, or traditional entertaining song. Navajo Nation Vice President Jonathan Nez joked with the crowd about the long awaited event.

"It's always great to see these women compete for the highest office on the land — Miss Navajo is one of those, and to see all these women compete for it is great," Nez said. "They're all champions; they all did great, but at the end of the day, we will have a new Miss Navajo. We want to say thank you to the outgoing Miss Navajo, Alyson Jeri Shirley, she did great for us!"

Shirley gave her farewell speech and wished all the best to the contestants. Even Rose Wauenka, 1968-1969 Miss Navajo Nation, extended her wishes.

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Vice Chairman Verlon Jose of Tohono O'odham Nation and 2016-2017 Miss Tohono O'odham-Jaylene Wood were also in attendance.

"It was a wonderful event, and the people were grateful. We share the same vision as the Navajo Nation; we have to stay together as one people, serving the people," Jose said.

Wood said the event was large and full with a sense of family with one vision and strong bonds.

"This is so beautiful and motivational... [I'm] proud to represent and be a part of this Culture Night," Wood said.

Tommy Lowe, of Lukachukai, Ariz., created this year's Miss Navajo Nation crown.

"In August, it took me three weeks to put together the new Miss Navajo Nation crown," Lowe said. "There are a lot of symbols and stories on it — a symbol of 1868 in remembrance for the Dineh; the Great Navajo Nation Seal; the 50 states; the cross to represent our faith."

Lowe said the Four Corners and the Navajo Code Talkers were also represented in the crown, along with the U.S. flag and the armed forces.

Finally, the announcements were made, with Kaylee Begay winning best essay; Ronda Joe, best butchering; Atheina Claw, Miss Photogenic; and Alissa Copi, Miss Congeniality.

As the final announcement was made, one could feel the tension in the air. The 2016-2017 Miss Navajo Nation was Ronda Joe, of Rock Point, Ariz.

"I feel amazed, out of the eight contestants I was selected to be Miss Navajo. It is a huge honor," she said. "Without my family and my relatives support for the encouragement everyday,

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I wouldn't be here today.... It has always been a dream, my grandfather planned for me to one day run for Miss Navajo, and ever since I was small, that has been my goal. And to have it a reality today, it's such joy, it's simply amazing.”

“It sounds like [Joe] will do a great job,” Nez said.

“Take care of your elderly and speak your language and have fun,” Joe concluded.

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