

Food for Hungry Hearts

Residents of the nation's largest Navajo reservation find Christ's love every week—in the form of free groceries.

Eleven years ago when Robert and Rene Briceland moved to Dilkon, Arizona, on the Navajo Nation reservation, they received a welcome they would never forget. They were not wanted by the locals, they were falsely accused of wanting to steal the land, and they received threats on their lives. The local government even voted to evict them from the reservation. It was a tough start for the young couple who so strongly believed God had called them to help the poor on the reservation.

That was then. Today, the Bricelands' persistence has paid off.

At no time is that more evident than on a Sunday morning when a small group of people—some white, some Indian—assemble for worship inside an A-frame building called the Jesus Bi'Ghan Mission ("House of Jesus").

In front of the building, a friendly, dark-haired gentleman wearing cowboy boots, black jeans and a print shirt steps forward with an inviting smile to introduce himself.

"Hi, I'm Pastor Bob," he says with a slightly Southern accent.

Children—white and Native American from the ages of 4 to 12—lead the worship service.

"Yahway haweh ha Yahweh ho-oooooo," the enthusiastic

congregation sings.

With uplifted hands, adult church members stand and worship while the children dance in a corner of the room. The song, titled "Jesus Is Good Medicine," is being sung in Mohawk.

Robert and Rene are the pastors of this mixed congregation in a small community tucked away in the flattop mesa hills, about 25 miles northeast of Winslow, Arizona.

It was their concern and care for the poor that helped them break down the barriers of prejudice and mistrust they initially encountered from the local folk. In a strange twist of fate, the Bricelands—through their food bank—ended up helping many of the area residents who were most opposed to their living on the reservation.

"A lot of the people who were against us at first have changed," Robert Briceland says.

The food ministry—which, along with Bi'Ghan Mission and other outreaches, is a part of the couple's Truth of Life Jesus Ministries—was started from the back of an old pickup truck. It began by providing groceries for 50 families a month. Today it serves nearly 450 families a month.

The church has acquired a large tractor-trailer freezer where they keep food refrigerated. Due to tribal laws, the Bricelands are not allowed to own any land or housing on the reservation. Their ministry is truly one of faith.

The couple doesn't receive a salary or stipend for their work.

They rely on donations from two food banks and the generosity of supporters for the means to minister and live. The challenge of not having a consistent income has caused them to be creative at housing their family.

When they arrived on the reservation there was no place for them to stay. For the first eight years they lived in a yellow school bus that had been gutted and modestly decorated. Their front door was the bus' emergency exit. They now live in a small two-bedroom house, which Robert built, located behind the church and, interestingly, next to the old bus.

In addition to the objections from locals who initially did not want the Bricelands on the reservation, there were questions from friends and family about how the couple would raise their children in such a different cultural environment.

"They were concerned that the kids would not learn social skills," Rene says.

But Robert says the sacrifices he and Rene have made to live on the reservation cannot compare with the grace he personally has received from God for making changes in his life. "I was the scum of the earth, and He came to me," Robert says.

For nine years during the 1980s Robert ran a construction company in Pennsylvania, but when the national economy stalled, the business collapsed. The stress associated with his failed livelihood, coupled with health problems he had developed, caused Robert to start drinking. He was married and had a young daughter, and the family moved to Arizona where he tried to start over.

As a result of the alcohol, however, his wife and daughter left. "I knew I was in bad shape," he says.

He was lonely and couldn't find work. Every time he saw a little girl he was reminded of his daughter, and he'd cry. The turning point in his life came, he says, when he realized he'd reached "the end of himself."

"One day while watching a Christian program I asked the Lord to come into my life," Briceland says with a quivering voice and teary eyes. "He came! Hallelujah."

It was that day, he says, when he heard God give him a mandate to tell anybody who would listen that Jesus was coming. While Robert was going through his hardship, Rene, who grew up in a Christian household, was also facing a major change in her life. She too had married and suffered through a divorce.

"After my divorce I told the Lord that I would do whatever He wanted me to do," she says.

She became involved with a street ministry in Phoenix, to which she devoted much of her time and energy. During that time she met Robert, who was ministering with another group in the area. The couple married four months after they met.

Shortly afterward they were invited to help some friends start a children's ministry on the reservation. That plan never panned out, but the Bricelands had found where they belonged.

Since then, the Bricelands' focus has been clear: to share the gospel of Jesus with the Navajo people.

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For more information, visit

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