

# GENERAL NEWS

## Navajo Times Under Fire

By Marley Shebala and Deenise Becenti

Window Rock- the struggle for freedom of the press continues within the Navajo Nation. Earlier this year, the Navajo Times became the news when the staff learned that there was an attempt by the Navajo Nation president's office to change the management of the paper, proposing to transfer current Publisher/Editor Tom Arviso Jr. to another tribal department.

The issue turned intense when the proposal reached the floor of the Navajo Nation Council in March. After several hours of discussion, the tribal upheld its decision a year ago to keep the tribal newspaper, the Navajo Times, free of political interference.

The Navajo council directed that the Navajo Times and KTNN radio station become privatized in a 51-to-7 vote, with eight abstentions, on March 11. Tribal officials say the vote does not mean the Navajo Nation will sell the two entities but will allow them to operate independently. This comes as a good news to the Navajo Times which has been publishing for over 25 years.

Under the tribal structure, the Navajo Times falls under the Division of Economic Development umbrella. Although the Navajo Nation owns the KTNN license, it basically operates semi-independently. The decision to privatize the two media groups came after Navajo President Albert Hale abruptly removed Navajo Economic Development Division Director Art Allison and replaced him the same day with Ferdinand Notah.

The Navajo president appoints the heads of the tribe's 11 divisions and three executive offices, and since the 14 administrative directors serve at his pleasure, they can be fired without cause. Hale stated in a March press release that Allison's termination was because he failed to fulfill Hale's economic initiatives to streamline the business site lease process, to establish financial assistance to increase business and to expand existing business opportunities.

Those were the Navajo president's reasons. But editor Arviso believes otherwise. Arviso told the tribal council that he suspects Hale fired Allison because Allison failed to bring the Navajo Times under control through censorship. Hale has heavily criticized the tribal paper because he felt the stories about him were "one-sided" and unbalanced, calling the coverage "misinformation" and "made up of half-truths". The Times had published a series of articles detailing practices by President Hale.

"The (tribal) president doesn't like reading about things that are not in his favor. That's not our fault," Arviso told the legislative body. "We don't make the news. We are here for the people first and foremost. We are not here for one particular person." Hale denied Allison's termination had anything to do with the tribal paper. Allison has neither confirmed nor denied publicly that he was fired for those reasons.

But Arviso said that Allison did state that he felt that the main reason he lost his job was because of the Navajo Times. "It's unfortunate that innocent people are caught in the middle of the controversy," said Arviso. "This whole turmoil has caused a lot of uneasiness with everyone who is associated with the Navajo Times. It's not a good feeling, knowing that at any time you could lose your job and that your whole life could change."

Under direct questioning from the Navajo Council, Notah admitted he had an unsigned draft memorandum from the tribal president office ordering Arviso's transfer. The memo was never delivered to Arviso because Notah said he destroyed it, causing some council delegates and the audience to laugh.

Arviso says it is clear the Navajo legislators would like to keep the Navajo Times on its current course of providing news to the Navajo people. "Our mission will not change. Our purpose is to provide the news- good or bad- to the readers," he said. "But with each sunset and with each controversy involving Hale, we never really know what will happen. We just hope that by the time the sun rises, and as time passes by, we will still be in operation, working to print the paper of the Navajo people."

## Native American Journalist Association should lead freedom of press

By Paul DeMain

As NAJA completes the final agenda for our annual conference in June, many issues continue to face the board and membership across Indian Country that we must address. The attempt by the president of the Navajo Nation to influence editorial views through criticism, or by firing or transfer of employees who oversee the newspaper, is a prime example of conflict that goes to the root of NAJA concerns.

In 1994, the publisher of Indian Country Today, Tim Giago wrote an editorial column of support for the firing of Robin Powell, editor of the Turtle Mountain Times, stating that tribes had the right to censor the content of any publication for which they paid production costs and staff salaries. In doing so, Giago ignored the opinions of other Native journalists who believe in freedom of the press. Giago did not mention in his column that at the time of Powell's firing he had a contract with the Turtle Mountain Chippewa government as a consultant to the newspaper.

Tribal newspapers are not just the property of a few elected officials, though some may think so. Tribal officials are elected to represent and legislate on behalf of the citizen members of their tribal government, empowered to spend money granted for the use and benefit of tribal citizens, and accountable for their decisions. Many tribal newspapers are started with grand mission statements about service on behalf of the citizens. "We want the tribal members to know what is going on." And that is a good goal for many newspapers-until they want to print factual information about events that reflect on the image, reputation and integrity of the tribe.

NAJA owes a letter of thanks to the Navajo Nation legislature for its recent resolution telling the president to keep his hands off the newspaper, but we need to do even more. I believe tribal newspapers established by tribal governments are owned by all tribal citizens, just like other tribal assets. And while editors and staff will still get transferred or fired on the basis of work evaluations or not fulfilling their responsibilities, it is wrong for the tribal government to fire editors for reporting the truth to their citizens.

### A Call to Action:

NAJA needs to draft model language that tribes can add to their constitutions and by-laws which would clearly provide for freedom of the Press within reserved territory, whether the newspaper is tribally- or privately-owned. NAJA also needs to draft model mission statements for use by tribal newspapers in order to clarify their roles and responsibilities to the citizens they serve. Real journalists will fight for the right of the newspapers to publish the factual truth and are willing to put their jobs on the line to preserve their integrity in covering all events, even those that are distasteful to elected leaders.

Finally, we need to provide a model contract for employment that editors and writers can use when being hired by tribal governments that includes provisions which protect those journalists from being fired for editorial decisions. While tribes may choose to exercise their sovereignty and not sign such a contract, it will be clearer for new employees and the tribe from the beginning. I would not seek employment as a tribal newspaper editor or media reporter without one.

### Why NAJA?

NAJA can provide the leadership in developing these documents because they are not otherwise likely to be developed by anyone else, and certainly not by most tribal governments who always have a full plate of issues to address.

The Native American Journalists Association was founded in 1984 by a number of journalists concerned about growing a new generation of Native Journalists and newspapers to tell our own story. Those founders include: Anita Fineday, Jose Barreriro, Patty Bowen, Mike Burgess, Verna Friday, Tim giago, George Gorospe, Lenore Keeshig-Tobias, Richard Lacourse, Adrian C. Louis, Sid Miller, Mary Polanco, Pat Sulcer, Loren Tapahe, Minnie Two Shoes and many other people concerned about the future of the Native press.

We owe those founders not just the honor of recognition, as was done during our ten-year commemoration ceremony in 1994 at New Echota, Georgia. We owe them respect by continuing to build on our strengths, recognize our weaknesses, and work toward goals that will provide for better news coverage from both tribal and independent publications that serve our people and the public.

Too often, the Native American Journalists Association receives word of tribal newspapers in danger of closing, or losing staff members for stories they print. The Navajo Times is a recent example of a tribally-owned newspaper coming under fire for covering a political controversy involving a tribal leader.

While NAJA cannot intervene in such cases because of its no-profit status, the NAJA Board of Directors wishes to send a clear message to tribal leaders across Indian country: Give the tribal press freedom to do its job.

At the same time, Native newspapers and broadcast stations must uphold the strictest standards in practicing fair and balanced coverage. It strengthens our stand for press freedom when member-newspapers and member-broadcast stations present both sides in highly-sensitive stories. True journalists strive to deliver the complete facts. Anything short of that can be perceived as pandering to one side. Tribal journalists must always remember that they represent the eyes and ears of all tribal members, and not their own interests.

NAJA exists today because its founders saw a need for Native journalists to band together for causes such as these. This issue strikes at the core of our duties and responsibilities as journalists. Since its inception 13 years ago, NAJA has provided training and resources to its members to reinforce these journalistic standards. NAJA will continue to offer this kind of training, which promotes fair and balanced coverage.

We can give our members the tools to responsibly cover tribal government. It's up to tribal leaders to let them practice it.

Karen Lincoln Michel, for NAJA Board of Directors

## WHAT DO YOU WANT FOR THE SILETZ TRIBE?

BY: Raymond J. Blacketer, Temporary Managing Editor

These article's raise serious questions. If we have a Public Relations Office, will that be enough to provide accurate coverage of the issues being decided today? Our Newspaper is funded by the 638 Self Governance Compact process, thus making Tribal Council a contractor of the BIA. As such, do they have the right to influence our paper? Or are they required by Federal Law to provide the service while meeting current program/professional standards; such as, freedom of inquiry, freedom of information and freedom of the press.

If we chose a true journalistic Newspaper, will controversial articles undermine our credibility in future endeavors? Do non-tribal members need to know what is happening within our tribe? Or does the need of a impartial Newspaper, outweigh Tribal privacy?

What do you Tribal Members think? What do you want? Do you want a general news, informational, down home type newsletter. Or would you rather have a true journalistic Newspaper knowing that events, decisions, activities and legislation will be covered in a fair, impartial but questioning manner?

Please mail in your ideas or suggestions. As they are received, they will be shared with everybody via the Newspaper. No names will be mentioned unless permission is given with your submission.