



News Bureau

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News Release

Sept. 14, 2009

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Zuni public school students star in joint project to revitalize traditional Zuni agriculture

Winning two first-place and two third-place ribbons in horticulture and honey competitions at the New Mexico State Fair on Sept. 11 is a major triumph for Zuni High School horticulture students and their science teacher, William Becker, especially because this is the horticulture project's first year.

The students' state fair entries included produce from the horticulture class's "waffle gardens," a traditional Zuni method of garden construction consisting of a series of parallel, square or rectangular depressions dug into the ground, creating a waffle-like pattern that maximizes use of available water. At the fair, the produce is displayed in student-made traditional Zuni pottery pieces. The students also entered honey collected from the class's two bee hives.

Becker's horticulture class is part of a larger collaborative effort involving New Mexico State University Cooperative Extension, the New Mexico Department of Education–Rural Education Division, two other schools — Twin Buttes High School and Zuni Middle School — and the larger Zuni community.

"A major goal of the Traditional Zuni Agriculture Revitalization Project is to stimulate the local Zuni economy by working through the Zuni public schools to re-introduce traditional Zuni agricultural practices, which have been declining in use since the early 1900s," explained Dr. Michael Patrick, a New Mexico State University Cooperative Extension Service community resource and economic development specialist, credited with bringing together the project's many partners.

Lee Watts, Extension agent with the Zuni Reservation Extension office, is hopeful that getting kids involved in their agricultural heritage will eventually help increase the number of

Zuni adults engaged in agriculture, which has declined from 30 percent a century ago to only 1.5 percent today.

"This project is not only an economic development tool. It is also helping tie Zuni youth back to their cultural heritage by actively engaging them in horticulture and other ag-related classes, where they learn about traditional farming practices more than a thousand years old. Using traditional Zuni farming practices, the students are actually going out and building waffle gardens and planting fruit orchards, in many cases using native seeds handed down through generations of Zuni farmers," Watts explained.

The project also envisions marketing traditionally grown Zuni produce, fruits, poultry and honey to generate income for the community.

Another goal is to make locally grown traditional Zuni fruits and vegetables readily available again in the community. As consumption of these traditional foods has declined among the Zuni in the last few decades, diet-related conditions like obesity, diabetes and heart disease have increased, according to Patrick.

In spring 2009, the project received \$10,000 from a special state legislative appropriation designated for rural revitalization and \$1,000 from the New Mexico State Parks Outdoor Education Program, according to Dr. James Holloway, Public Education Department assistant secretary, Rural Education Division, who was instrumental in getting the funds allocated for the traditional Zuni agriculture revitalization project.

"This project is connected to the New Mexico Rural Revitalization Initiative, a larger effort we have in 27 school districts that are engaged in some type of improvement activities that we call 'revitalization', and we work closely with NMSU extension, and Dr. Michael Patrick in particular, on these projects," Holloway explained.

"The projects do three things: revitalize interest in school–community partnerships, help instill pride and citizenship among students who get to give back to their communities, and they provide entrepreneurial activities that students might be able to make a living with some day," he said.

"Each community decides what they want to do. We felt the Zuni traditional ag project met the Rural Revitalization Initiative's requirements," he said.

"And they are getting the parents involved. Here you have an opportunity for kids and adults in a community to work together to bring back cultural practices that have been gone for a hundred years," Holloway explained.

"You've got agriculture, you've got Zuni history, you've got all those skills taught in the classroom, and they all come together in those little garden plots in the ground, in the waffle gardens at the schools in Zuni.

"We just felt that if we could help those kids, that would be a good thing," he said.

And on Wednesday, a grateful Becker, with a contingent of his Zuni High School horticulture class students, traveled to Santa Fe to personally thank Holloway and the Rural Education Division for their financial support and for the help provided by Brenda Lyle-Gray, Rural Education Bureau education administrator, who works closely with students in the Zuni schools on this and other projects.

As a gesture of their gratitude, the students presented Holloway with produce from the horticulture class waffle gardens, arranged in student-made, traditional Zuni pottery pieces, along with jars of honey collected from the class bee hives.

"Going to Santa Fe to thank Dr. Holloway and his department was really important for us to do. It was a great experience," said Samantha Tsatie, Zuni High School horticulture student.

At the state fair, the class won first place for their comb honey entry and their green onion entry. They won third place for their junior garden display and for their filtered honey entry.

"I think the entire community of Zuni will be proud of what our students have achieved," Becker said. "Winning at the state fair in our first year demonstrates that we can put out a quality product, not just any product. We'll be back next year and will be entering in more categories."

Becker plans for the horticulture course to be completely self-funding with revenue from the class's bee hives, which, with the addition of more hives in the coming year, are expected to bring in as much as \$5,000 a year.

The Zuni High School horticulture class state fair entries can be see in the agricultural products entry section of the Agriculture Building at the New Mexico State Fair through Sept. 27.



NMSU News Photo

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CUTLINE: Zuni High School horticulture students proudly display produce they helped grow in the class's waffle gardens at Zuni High School. The traditional Zuni pottery was made by Zuni High School students using the school's art class facilities. In Santa Fe on Sept. 9, the students formally presented the produce to Dr. James Holloway, Public Education Department, assistant secretary, Rural Education Division. The students and their horticulture teacher, William Becker, made the presentation as a gesture of thanks for the support they received from the Rural Education Division.

Pictured: (Front row, from the left) Cullen Quam, Samantha Tsatie and Samantha Taylor, students; and Linda Croom, NMPED–Rural Education Division.

(Middle row from the left) Pam Byrum, Zuni High School employee and parent; Robin Luna, student; David Matarazzo, Zuni High School technology teacher; and William Becker. (Back row, from the left) Dr. Michael Patrick, NMSU Cooperative Extension; Nicholas Chavez, student; Donna Grein and Dr. Jerry Pitzl, NMPED Rural Ed Bureau; and Dr. James Holloway. (NMPED photo by Beverly Friedman)



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CUTLINE: Traditional Zuni "waffle garden" ready to be planted, Zuni High School, spring 2009. The centuries-old design helps maximize use of available water. Produce from the high school's horticulture class gardens won first place in the green onion category and third place in the junior garden display category at this year's NM State Fair (Photo by William Becker, Zuni High School).



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CUTLINE: Traditional Zuni "waffle garden," Zuni High School, spring 2009, with green onions, peppers, corn, and squash growing. Produce from the high school horticulture class's gardens won first place in the green onion category and third place in the junior garden display category at this year's NM State Fair (Photo by William Becker, Zuni High School).