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THE SUNDAY JOURNAL

JULY 26, 2020

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"Anthony on the Plains": Omaha powwow dancer Anthony (Nudahunga) Parker and a wolf hybrid near Santa Fe.

FACE TO FACE WITH CRAIG VARJABEDIAN

REBUILDING CULTURAL IDENTITY

Photographer's project taps into rich Native American past

Editor's note: Santa Fe photographer Craig Varjabedian's ambitious "Native Light" project features images of Native Americans sharing their stories. He took time out recently to talk about the project.

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BY KENT WALZ
SENIOR EDITOR

"We are part Earth and Sky, part flesh and spirit. Dancing through two worlds, forever seeking the knowledge of those gone before us."

Marlene Tsosie Bad Warrior from the Diné Nation, of the Salt Water clan

Marlene is just one of more than 100 stunning photographs by Santa Fe photographer Craig Varjabedian. But her words above capture the essence of his project.

"I think the thing I am tapping into — and what I want to do is share their voice — is this duality between the past and the present," Varjabedian said. "Almost channeling their rich Native American past when they are in front of my camera."

Many Native Americans who have been separated from their heritage are seeking to rebuild their cultural identity and regain their power over how they are represented, he said.

"Native Light" is an "exploration of how one develops and sustains cultural identity in the aftermath of genocide" and rooted in "the need to explore how the

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Craig Varjabedian



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"Marlene Bad Warrior Green Jingle": Marlene Tsosie Bad Warrior from the Diné Nation, of the Salt Water clan.

GRT defies expectations during shutdown

Construction, up 18% in April, has largely preserved tax distribution

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BY JESSICA DYER
JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

Indoor shopping malls and hair salons around New Mexico were closed for all of May, and restaurants statewide were barred from providing inside, sit-down service.

But gross receipts tax — a tax levied on the sale of most goods and services — did not plummet amid the sweeping, COVID-19-related economic shutdown.

In fact, it barely budged.

Statewide, newly released figures show that the May GRT distributions that flowed into cities, counties and other governmental coffers was just 1.2% less than May of 2019.

The impact varied by individual community, with those heavily reliant on tourism or oil and gas hurt more than others, according to Lucinda Sydow, chief economist with the New Mexico Taxation and Revenue Department, but the overall decline was less than many anticipated.

"I would've expected it to be a much larger decline," said Jim Peach, professor emeritus of economics at New Mexico State University.

But that does not mean everything is stable.

Economists say the state likely has not dodged the bullet so much as it has been outrunning it.

See GRT CHALLENGES >> A4

Political class has its eyes on Lujan Grisham

Speculation about higher office also swirled around predecessor

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BY DAN BOYD
JOURNAL CAPITOL BUREAU

SANTA FE — Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham has had an invisible companion while directing New Mexico's coronavirus response efforts this summer: incessant national political speculation about her potential role in a Joe Biden administration.

The first-term Democratic governor has been repeatedly mentioned as a possible vice presidential pick — Biden has said he will pick a female running mate — or Cabinet member.

Unlike some candidates, Lujan Grisham has not rejected the speculation or said she would decline an offer, but she has also not publicly touted her own credentials.

"It's flattering, but I try to just keep focused here," the governor said in a recent interview with The Washington

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MAINSTAY OF MORNING TV REGIS PHILBIN DIES AT 88

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NMHU ALUM HAS A GOOD HOMECOMING

Promotional video for New Mexico Highlands University wins two awards.



LIFE IN NM >> B1



Photographer's project: Rebuilding cultural identity

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visual representation of self can rebuild specific cultural identity for individuals and, perhaps, future generations.”

His portrait subjects are volunteers who come to him through word-of-mouth — a network that has grown over the years. The subject, he says, is as important as the artist.

“Composition of the image is a collaboration, as presentation of self and artifacts that are deeply rooted in culture.”

While most participants supply their own artifacts and regalia, Varjabedian said, some have nothing. “For these individuals, I provide a selection of traditional objects from which they may choose if they wish.”

He said one young urban Native American boy with no direct ties to his tribe (Diné) chose to display the body art he had tattooed on his back “as part of his search for personal cultural self-identity.”

Telling stories

Varjabedian's eventual plan is to create a sweeping exhibition of the images and stories.

But “Native Light” is still a work in progress. Varjabedian wants to move beyond New Mexico and make portraits of Native Americans in other parts of the country. He says it might take another four or five years.

“I can't speed it along, and certainly COVID has gotten in the way. Access to people right now is problematic, and I don't want to put anyone into jeopardy, even with precautions. I don't think the place where this project comes from would allow that.”

Varjabedian has photographed between 75 and 100 people for the project. The images can be viewed at his website, Craigvarjabedian.com. But he also wants to share the stories of those he photographs in words as well as pictures.

“In the best portrait sessions, the people open up to me and reveal something deeper about themselves,” he said. “I will collect stories and recollections they willingly share, and they will be transcribed and included with the photographs when they are presented.”

“I still have to sit down and write them. I have notes. And I still have interviews to do, tracking people down and asking my barrage of questions. I see it as an opportunity for the Native American people I have photographed to tell their stories.”

“My hope,” he said, “is that this project will reveal how the visual representation of self with social, familial and ceremonial artifacts can be a transformative part of rebuilding individuals' cultural identity in the wake of historical trauma.”

One of the most compelling is Thomas Begay, a 90-plus-year-old Navajo Code Talker — who offered to sing the Marine Corps hymn in Navajo for Varjabedian and promptly did so.

“He said, ‘Do you want to hear me sing the Marine Corps hymn in Navajo?’ I said, ‘Hell, yeah.’ So I turned my phone on and recorded him singing it. It was amazing hearing the sound of his singing coming off of the walls of this huge factory building where we were shooting. It was so powerful I had to sit down.”

“What I love about his story is that he was there on Iwo Jima when they raised the flag on Mount Suribachi. He saw it when it happened and when it was reenacted for the camera. As he told his story, I just sat there and said, ‘Oh my God’ — in awe that he let me photograph him and was willing to share that piece of himself with me.”

Armenian heritage

Varjabedian identifies with Native Americans through his own heritage.

“My grandfather fled the Armenian genocide,” he said. It's something in common with Native Americans. “We both have that wound. The stories my grandfather told me and that my parents told me about what happened in the old country were horrific.”

But he says while there is a shared wound, he isn't trying to put his experience on a level with what has happened to Native Americans, including the recent devastation of COVID-19.

Varjabedian talks about the history of oppression of Native Americans over the centuries, from the Acoma Massacre to the Long Walk of the Navajo through the more recent forced removal of Native American children from

See PAGE A11



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Navajo code talker Thomas H. Begay fought at the battle of Iwo Jima.

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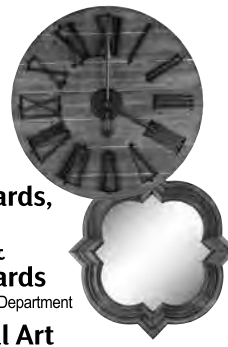


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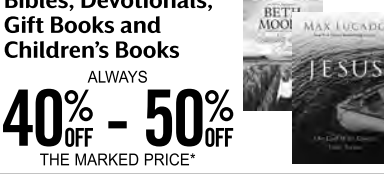
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60 WEDDING ANNIVERSARY

Louella & Jenaro Pedroncelli

Louella and Jenaro Pedroncelli are celebrating 60 years of marriage. They were married on July 30, 1960 at Holy Family Church in Albuquerque. They've been blessed with 4 sons, their wives, 13 grandchildren, 11 great grandchildren, and 5 great-greats. They have been active in their parish, extensively involved in community service, and have traveled widely. Jenaro was director of the NM Dept. of Labor, and he retired after over 40 years with IBEW (International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers). Louella retired after 33 years with APS. They are grateful to God for their beautiful life and wonderful family.

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their homes to attend boarding schools designed to “Kill the Indian ... save the man.”

Varjabedian says he’s constantly “astonished by the fact we live in maybe the wealthiest country in the world and we have people living among us who don’t have access to basic things most of us take for granted, like running water. I’m saddened and appalled.”

“I still feel culpable ... still feel that I’m a part of that shame for what happened here.”

Varjabedian, like famed photographer Edward Curtis, makes sure he gives an honorarium to every Native American he photographs. Curtis, he said, honored them with something significant that made a difference in their lives, “so I’ve done the same thing.”

That’s a primary reason people can donate to finance the project with contributions to “Fractured Atlas,” a nonprofit 501(c)(3) arts service organization.

Detroit transplant

Varjabedian’s family moved from Canada to Detroit when Craig was about 14.

His first photography work was as a stringer for the Detroit Free Press. He was assigned to shoot a high school soccer game.

He graduated from the University of Michigan with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree and a master’s degree from Rochester Institute of Technology. He has done fine art photography for 40 years, receiving grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, Samuel H. Kress Foundation, McCune Charitable Foundation and the New Mexico Humanities Council.

A burly man who sports a beard and has an infectious laugh, Varjabedian received an Emmy Award in 1991 for his collaboration with filmmaker Karl Kernberger on the PBS documentary “En Divina Luz: the Penitente Moradas of New Mexico.” His latest book, “Into the Great White Sands,” was published by University of New Mexico Press in 2018.

Along the way, he did his share of commercial photography — CEO portraits and the like — to pay the bills.

His wife, Kathryn, works at Los Alamos National Laboratory, and daughter Rebekkah is a health care worker at Vanderbilt in Tennessee. His mother is still living, and he has three sisters, but envies the extended family relationships he sees in New Mexico.

Attending graduations, weddings



©CRAIG VARJABEDIAN FOR THE NATIVE LIGHT PHOTO COLLABORATION

Photographer Craig Varjabedian with Tanysha, Keres.

and quinceañeras, Varjabedian says he’s “always been struck by the extended family relationships that people have here. I so wish I had something like that in my life.”

He has been in Santa Fe since the early 1980s but became a U.S. citizen only several years ago.

“I’m not sure why I didn’t do it sooner. It wasn’t a matter of not wanting to. Making pictures is a more than full-time occupation, and I just never got around to it. It was so stupid on my part not to become a member of the country I live in and love.”

Anthony

He has been working on “Native Light” in earnest for the past four or five years, but the project really began many years ago on the plains south of Santa Fe. In a way, it was almost unintentional.

Varjabedian was doing a portrait of Anthony, a champion Omaha powwow dancer, on a hillside south of Santa Fe.

“There was a wolf hybrid that belonged to a cowgirl who was on location that day,” he said. “I saw the sun setting, and Anthony was in the grass when then all of a sudden the dog walked up and lay down at his feet. It’s the magic of the whole thing. I got one frame before that dog picked up and walked away.”

The result was Varjabedian’s iconic photo “Anthony on the Plains” — and the beginning of “Native Light.”

“I was astounded at how incredible the picture was. I fully believe it goes beyond my skill set. Technique is important ... but when you put that all aside and say what else is here ... I tapped into something I didn’t

really expect.”

Varjabedian, 62, has spent a great deal of time with Native Americans and says, “I’ve never not been welcomed.”

“I know when it’s appropriate to take out my camera.”

Asked about his time with the Diné, he said, “the thing I adore is they have an incredible sense of humor. They have a joy about them that I admire deeply.”

“You can see their truth in their pictures.”

Asked what lessons he’s learned, Varjabedian recounts the story of a Native American who as a boy was forcibly whisked away from his rural life to a boarding school. Despite that trauma, the man isn’t bitter or angry today.

“When I asked him why, he told me his grandfather was a medicine man who taught him that ‘if you are angry about all of this it will eat you alive.’

“I cannot tell you how important that story was to me in my life ... to let go of stuff and look for joy.”

Magic at work

Varjabedian has a new book coming out this fall titled “The Light of Days Gone By,” a retrospective of his 40 years behind the lens.

But during the interview, he downplays his own talents, focusing instead on the magic of subjects and place.

“Everything that has happened in my life has had a context. I end up starting something, and the pictures start to blow my mind, realizing they are something beyond the description of things. Moments of grace.”

Part of that magic is New Mexico.

“It’s very important to me that we live in an incredibly beautiful place. I’ve photographed a lot of places. Iceland for example. And I made some nice pictures in Iceland. But there is something else going on in the pictures I make here, whether it’s the Native Americans or the cowboys I photograph or White Sands that I just did a book on. There is something magical about this place.”

“With COVID I’ve had time to ponder. My pictures come out of the life that I observe. It’s rich and it’s beautiful. I don’t have the words to tell you how grateful I am that I’m allowed to do this. I could still be in Detroit doing what I was doing. Instead, I’m here where I get up early in the morning to watch the sunrise because it’s just so incredibly beautiful.”

“I think to myself that these pictures are better than I can do. I’m getting help from something greater than myself.”

Dramatic decline found in Western bumblebee

Causes include pesticides, warming climate, pathogens

BY AMY JOI O’DONOGHUE
DESERET NEWS

SALT LAKE CITY — A federal review of existing data unveils an alarming trend for the western bumblebee population, which has seen its numbers dwindle by as much as 93% in 20 years.

The find by the U.S. Geological Survey will help inform a species status assessment to begin this fall by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which may ultimately add the insect to its endangered species list.

Tabitha Graves, senior author of the study and a research ecologist with the survey, said the trend with the western bumblebee documented between 1998 and 2018 is troubling because of their important role as pollinators.

“They contribute a lot of money in terms of pollination services for our food crops,” she said. “Seventy to 80% of flowering plants and crops are pollinated by animals overall. Pollination contributes to \$20 billion in agriculture in the United States.”

Bumblebees also pollinate plants in the wild, such as huckleberries which are a staple food source for bears.

There are multiple factors at play that are contributing to the demise of the bumblebee, including pesticides, habitat fragmentation, a warming climate and pathogens, researchers say.

“People started to notice these declines in the 1990s. This bumblebee that was once very widespread and common is something that people started to see less frequently,” said Diana Cox-Foster, research leader at



KRISTIN MURPHY/THE DESERET NEWS

A decline in the population of the Western bumblebee has alarmed scientists.

the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Pollinating Insects Research Unit at Utah State University.

“There are localized populations where it is still happy and healthy, but there have been declines in large parts of its previous distributions.”

There are concerns that other species of bumblebees used in commercial pollination are spreading pathogens to the western bumblebee, Cox-Foster added.

“The role of pests and pathogens is of particular concern,” she said. “There is also climate change and how that has affected the distribution of the bee. Agri-chemicals are also part of the stress issue.”

Graves said the research doesn’t point to one conclusive cause for the decline, which will be the focus of another research effort to better quantify specific threats.

“There are a lot of places in western North America where we have not done sampling for bumblebees for a long time. We need to support this kind of monitoring and research,” she said.

To that end, residents can get in on the action by downloading an app at bumblebeewatch.org and documenting what bumblebees they may come across.



Lobo football

Parents’ act of faith: Dropping off freshmen during pandemic

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The long game

It took two years of trying for man to set free throw shooting record

METRO & NM >> B7



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“Anthony on the Plains”: Omaha powwow dancer Anthony (Nudahunga) Parker and a wolf hybrid near Santa Fe.

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