

Working among Navajo children

by Sonya Haggie

Wanganui-born Farina McCarthy thrives on her work with Navajo indian children in Utah, USA.

Her dedication to her job as guidance counsellor at White Horse High School within Utah's Navajo reservation is obvious in the animation of her face when she talks about it.

Miss McCarthy returned to New Zealand earlier this year to attend the 25th jubilee of Hamilton's Church College of New Zealand.

Her life is centered on her work at the 350-student high school at Mantazuma Creek, a town she compares in size with Kawhia.

The five-year-old school, built when the state was forced to erect a public school to cater for the reservation children, has seen its students change from backward and nearly illiterate in-

dians to bright, intelligent young people.

Miss McCarthy began her position, which included setting the school curriculum, five years ago and sees an affinity between Navajo indians and our own Maori people.

White Horse High School was built after the American Indian Movement, a group of young indians, won a court case that saw the school authorities charged with failing to provide an education for the reservation children.

The children were having to travel from 72km to 110km a day to the nearest school.

"When the school opened most of the locals and those that had taught the kids assumed it would be very difficult for us to get any kids into school because they had very few Navajos graduate from school," she said.

"There had been a lot of problems

with absenteeism so they didn't think that Navajos were really interested in education.

"But they didn't really know much about Navajos."

She said Navajo values were similar to Maori values, especially in their belief that family came first.

And when there was some family matter to attend to school took a back seat.

The Navajo people lived on a large arid land that failed to earn most families a living. Parents of the school's students lived on welfare, she said.

There was no electricity and water had to be carried to their homes.

The tribe was scattered all over the reservation in small family groups and their existence was made slightly easier by royalties from oil and uranium mined from the land.

The Navajos spent that income on improved schooling, scholarships, medical clinics and so on.

When White Horse High School was opened the reading ability of its 18-year-olds matched that of its 10 and 11-year-olds, she said.

Now, in just five years, it equaled any other school and its students were getting the type of education they had a right to.

Miss McCarthy, a former Church College student, trained as a teacher at Palmerston North before attending Brigham Young University at Utah where she gained a masters degree in educational psychology and a bachelors degree in history.

She returned to New Zealand and worked as a guidance counsellor at Church College before doing an 18-month mission for her church.

After another year at Church College and six months in Hawaii she applied for her job and, after a two-year wait, became a permanent resident of the US.

Six months ago she became foster mother to a 12-year-old Navajo girl whose parents are victims of alcoholism, a disease that affects many reservation indians, including her students.

But watching the children grow, learn, and improve is the most rewarding and fulfilling aspect of her job.

"I am rewarded by knowing these young people are meeting the challenges, that their lives are improving, that they are going to be better off for it," she said.

"The reason I am there is through my commitment to religion and because I am interested in people and education.

"I feel that education is for all people and all races," she said.

Farina McCarthy — helping young Navajo indians meet challenges. Photo Jenny Scown.

