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Don't Laugh at the Skinny Horse:

Longtime Senator John Pinto Honored for Lifetime of Service

The Hispano Round Table of New Mexico will honor Senator John Pinto (D-3, McKinley, San Juan) on Wednesday, January 27, during their Annual Tribute to Hispano Legislators' Dinner starting at 5:30 p.m. at La Fonda on the Santa Fe Plaza. Senator Pinto is scheduled to receive the "Lifetime Achievement Award" for nearly four decades of public service as well as many other celebrated accomplishments that have bettered the lives of his fellow Navajo people and New Mexicans in general.

The 91-year-old is the currently the longest serving senator in the New Mexico State Senate and is chairman of the Indian & Cultural Affairs Committee, a member of the Education Committee, and an advisory member of the joint Committee on Compacts. On the opening day of the 2016 Legislative Session, the Democratic Party of New Mexico also honored Senator Pinto, bestowing him with the "Bruce King Award" for his many years of service.

Born in Lupton, Arizona, on December 15, 1924, Senator Pinto says he is currently committed to finding resources to help the many homeless people of his district, which includes most of the Gallup area and the Navajo Nation within the state. He is working with leaders in McKinley County and the City of Gallup to address this historically harsh reality of his district.

The homeless issue was also a problem when Senator Pinto was growing up.

"My parents were uneducated and didn't have regular jobs," Senator Pinto says, revealing that his own past helps him to relate to the plight of the homeless. "Sometimes, I was hungry and I had to look for food myself."

As a youth, Senator Pinto says he lived with his grandparents on the reservation in Lupton, Arizona, and he left them shortly after he turned 12 to find a job washing dishes at a restaurant in Gallup where his parents lived at the time. "I'm glad they gave me the job," Senator Pinto remembers of his first bosses, adding that it was the owner of the business who first encouraged him to get an education.

Senator Pinto relates that in 1864 his grandparents were forced to leave their homes at gunpoint by the U.S. Army, which under the leadership of Colonel Kit Carson burned the tribe's homeland on the Navajo Nation to bring the people into submission. As many as 200 Navajo people died during the 300-mile

Long Walk from the Four Corners area southeast to Bosque Redondo near what is now Fort Sumner, where they were interned in deplorable conditions alongside members of other tribes. After much suffering and attrition, the Navajo people ultimately were allowed to return to what was left of their homeland in 1866.

As the case with most of the Navajo youth of his generation, Senator Pinto says he only spoke his native Diné language when he first entered an Indian school operated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Fort Defiance, Arizona. It was there that Senator Pinto first started to learn English and get a glimpse of the world beyond his grandparents' home on the reservation.

Senator Pinto says he has many fond memories as a teenager when he and his father gathered pinon nuts in an area south of Gallup near Quemado. Sometimes borrowing from the nests of squirrels and other wild varmints, they sometimes accumulated from 300-500 pounds of the official state nut in a day, later selling their bounty for much needed cash to buy life's necessities. "There was way more pinon back then," he says of his teen-aged years during the Great Depression.

Shortly thereafter, the young man left the state at the onset of World War II to live with his sister in Torrance, California, just south of Los Angeles, where he finished high school. Senator Pinto says he returned home to the reservation after graduating and soon found himself on a bus with other Navajo boys en route to a military base in Phoenix, Arizona, where they all hoped to pass physicals to join the U.S. Marine Corps.

"On the bus to the service, I was sitting across from this (muscular Navajo) boy who kept pointing at me and saying, 'That boy is too skinny and too small. He doesn't look too intelligent. He's going to fail his physical,'" Senator Pinto recalls. "The next day, I passed and that guy didn't. They sent him home after that."

Senator Pinto says that experience resonated with his late father-in-law who always referred to that story and told people, "Don't ever laugh at the skinny horse!" It also left an impression on Senator Pinto himself: "I don't ever criticize people the way they look."

Interestingly, as with so many other Native Americans and other people of color in his time, Senator Pinto served during and after World War II in the U.S. military, which only decades earlier was responsible for the injustice and suffering of his grandparents. The Marines quickly recruited the young Pinto and 34 other young Diné-speaking Navajos to become part of an elite, top-secret group known as the Code Talkers and sent them to Camp Pendleton in San Diego for training. Senator Pinto says that none of original group of 29 Code Talkers is still alive. This brave group was sent to the South Pacific to fight the Japanese during the war and they used the Navajo language to help defeat the Japanese. Senator Pinto says that he was ordered to join a second group of 35 Navajo soldiers who were trained in the secret military code and were just about to be deployed to the Pacific Theater when the war ended in 1945.

There are only 26 of that second group still living, he says. It wasn't until more than a half-century later that the U.S. Government officially recognized the wartime contributions of the Code Talkers, who

communicated with each other on radios on the battlefield, relaying tactical military code in their Native tongue. The Japanese military was never able to decipher the code, which is credited with highly contributing to success of defeating the tenacious Asian soldiers in the Pacific.

Senator Pinto says he is currently writing a book about his experiences as a Code Talker and has thus far completed about 60 pages. He says he is proud not only to have served with his fellow Navajo brothers, but also with other soldiers of a wide variety of ethnicities. "We all stuck together to defeat the enemy!" he proudly recounts.

After his honorable discharge in 1946, Senator Pinto returned to Gallup where he resumed washing dishes for a living. After further encouragement there from his boss to leave and continue his education, Senator Pinto again left his homeland and enrolled at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. Senator Pinto admits that he struggled many times with English courses at the school, but with perseverance and hard work he was able to earn bachelor and master degrees from the institution.

"I failed three times to pass a required, four-part English A test to graduate," Senator Pinto remembers. "I cried every time (I failed) because I really wanted the (bachelor's) degree. On the fourth time -- I passed. There were students on both sides of me, all with different booklets so that we wouldn't copy from each other."

Senator Pinto built on his milestone accomplishment to earn his master's degree and wrote a 300-page thesis called, "Attendance Counseling," which he said is still housed and available to view at the UNM Library. Once again, Senator Pinto returned to the Navajo Nation and this time he put his education and experience to work helping his people -- and he hasn't stopped since.

Becoming a teacher and later a truant officer in the Gallup/McKinley School District, Senator Pinto wasted no time encouraging Navajo youth to stay in school, advice that was quite rare when he was young.

"I used to visit the parents of truant kids, and I would encourage them to stay in school," Senator Pinto says. "There were a lot of kids missing school. They appreciated it later when they would graduate. They would say, 'Thank you.'"

Senator Pinto's active role in the community prompted many people to encourage him to get into politics so that he could be more effective in helping people. He also had a personal desire to seek office, so that he could do something to resolve an issue of a particular land parcel categorized as sub-marginal, which initially was part of the Navajo Nation, then occupied by a non-Indian allowed to live there during the Great Depression. The land, located between Zuni Pueblo and Gallup, was eventually sold by the non-Indians to the federal government. Senator Pinto believed the land should have been returned to the Navajo Nation. The issue inspired Senator Pinto to run and win a seat on the McKinley County Commission, and he later led a successful charge in that capacity to have land returned to the Navajo Nation.

The success and recognition Senator Pinto built as a county commissioner helped him get elected to the New Mexico State Senate in November 1976, and he has successfully held that seat ever since.

"At that time I was very poor and I could only afford a Greyhound bus ticket to Albuquerque," Senator Pinto remembers of his first journey to the Capitol to Santa Fe as a freshman senator during the dead of winter in 1977. "I was sitting there at I-40 and I-25 hitchhiking. Then a car stopped. (The driver) opened the door and he asked me where I was going. I said, 'I'm going to Santa Fe, I'm a senator.'

"Then he said, 'I'm a senator too!'"

The two completed their journey to the Roundhouse and Senator Pinto began another excursion to establish himself as one of the longest serving lawmakers in New Mexico history.