

From Zuni Art to the Sky Is the Limit!

Daryl Shack, Sr.

Kessbi. Hello, my name is Daryl Shack, and I am a proud member of the Zuni Pueblo tribe from western New Mexico. I am honored to share the story of the Zuni Youth Enrichment Project (ZYEP) and *Ho'n A:wan* (for everyone) Park.

As part of our history, the Zuni people settled here in what we call the Middle Place. We were more isolated than other Pueblos, which helped us to practice our customs and traditions. Zuni culture and religion often influence Zuni artists like me. I have been a fetish carver for over 17 years.

Even though art is a driver of the Zuni economy (80 percent of households have at least one artist), artists have rarely been a part of the conversations to shape the future of our community. So, when ZYEP first came to us a few years ago about forming an artists' committee for the creation of a park, we bet that it was because a grant said they needed to include us. However, Dr. Joseph Claunch, of ZYEP, really made time to listen to us and made it clear that this was about doing something positive for the kids. I'm a father, and we all care a lot about our kids. Many of our kids don't have mentors because so many adults struggle with social issues, like alcoholism, domestic abuse, and suicide. We kept this at the top of our minds while we were planning the park, asking, "How do we curb these weaknesses?"

Social problems can be curbed when a person is dedicated to making art. Before I begin working with mother earth, carving, my mind needs to be clear to see what animals will come and plan out where this creation is going. This is what we are trying to teach our children and families—clear intentions, commitment, and follow-through for themselves, the youth, and our culture.

One goal we had as the artists' committee was to help give the community a sense of ownership of the park. The Zuni religious community had concerns before we even started because the park area is very close to our sacred Zuni riverbed. The space was also a favorite hangout spot for drinking and vandalism. Neighbors were afraid the park would encourage more loitering and negative activity. The artists' committee met with the community to try to understand and address their concerns. Since some of the artists (including myself) are also religious leaders, we helped build trust to reassure the community that we wouldn't let anything culturally inappropriate happen. We reflected upon our own upbringing when we had the Zuni River to play in and around, in contrast with many kids today, who are mostly inside playing on their iPads and not learning cultural traditions. In our efforts to engage everyone, we involved 700 elementary school children in one of our art projects to make symbolic pieces honoring their clan. We also worked with the Department of Corrections, high school kids, and other community members in building parts of the park to increase ownership and reduce chances of vandalism.

Furthermore, the artists' committee worked very closely with the architecture firm, ZYEP, and other artists to design many parts of the park. Dr. Claunch and Dr. Tom Faber really encouraged us to try out our ideas. ZYEP let me activate the varied experiences I had gathered from my past, share my knowledge with the group, and take leadership. Instead of what the architects usually did—plain walls and chain-link fences—we helped design and build traditional *vegas* (wooden posts), coyote fencing, and native plants as a perimeter for the park. Through the creation of our request for proposals (RFPs), artists made some amazing murals telling the Zuni origin story at the park to help keep the youth connected to their history. Our committee took on many roles, including personally letting artists know about opportunities and visiting them to check in once they were selected.

All of this work has paid off. The grand opening was such a blessing because the park is so different from everything else we have in Zuni. The kids are used to playing on uneven ground with dirt and litter everywhere and no outdoor art. Our community now has a beautifully designed building, full-sized soccer field, basketball courts, multipurpose room, commercial kitchen, two classrooms, and an amphitheater. Best of all, the park itself is art. I've seen kids staring up at the murals and sharing what they know about these stories and where they come from. The local police have commented that the area has become much safer.

ZYEP has helped bring recognition to Zuni artists. We had tried to organize to better sell our art in the past, but ZYEP has helped catalyze us to meet and talk about our ideas. We now have the potential to provide trainings for other artists and the community. Dr. Claunch is the soul behind the park. He has helped build artists' confidence, even recommending me to a panel for the Zuni Governor Candidate Forum.

And now? The sky is the limit. Last winter, my son was part of a play to tell old Zuni stories at the park. They were trying to do this quickly because winter time is for *Belap'na:kweah*, when the community gathers around the fire to tell stories from generation to generation to teach the moral values and lessons of Zuni. It was very important for us to make this a multi-generational space to be able to pass on our principles. The children have a place where they can learn from mentors, which they don't always have at home. I'm thinking about teaching social dance here, too. This park has given the children a place to call home.

Elabwka. Thank you so much to ZYEP, ArtPlace, and everyone who contributed to helping us make Zuni dreams come true.

Daryl Shack, Sr. is a proud member of the Zuni Pueblo Nation from the western part of New Mexico. He belongs to the Corn Clan and was born for the Raven Clan. Aside from being an artist, he is a cultural interpreter who has various religious leadership roles in his community, which has a population of about 10,000. Daryl's background includes public service work and human service work for the Zuni Senior Center; he has also served as an activity director for Little Sister of the Poor and a program director for the Zuni tribe's Senior Companions and Foster Grandparent Program. Daryl has been making traditional Zuni fetishes for over 17 years. Most recently, he was elected as the first-ever president of the Zuni Pueblo ArtWalk (zunipuebloart.org). He brings a vision of forward progress and an even larger recognition for the undoubtedly fine art that comes from the hands of his people.