





Wanda Bowers, right, and Gloria Wilson, two of the Native Relief Foundation leaders, show off one of two intricate homemade quilts up for raffle to help raise funds for the organization dedicated to providing clothes, shoes, food and toys to desolate and poor reservation communities in the cold upper Midwest.

**HOLLYWOOD** — Two quilts will help hundreds throughout Indian Country brave the upcoming winter.

Native Relief Foundation (NRF), led by a core of Seminole Tribal members, is raffling off the elaborate handmade quilts to help send a truckload of donated warm clothing, shoes, blankets plus food and toys to poor, remote upper Midwest reservations in time for Christmas.

Raffle tickets are \$5 for one or \$20 for five and can be purchased from Tribal members in each Seminole community.

“I’ve seen the conditions out there. I’ve seen the kids,” said Wanda Bowers about the poverty found on some of the most desolate upper Midwest reservations.

Since 2011 Bowers, Gloria Wilson and Jennifer “Ebo” Osceola have held leading roles in the grassroots, nonprofit collection drive based out of Hollywood Reservation. Alice Billie, Esther Gopher and Charlotte Burgess head the effort in Immokalee, Big Cypress and Brighton, respectively.

Wilson, the foundation’s spokeswoman, said the handful of friends was inspired after seeing a television news special five years ago about desperate conditions on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. According to the Department of the Interior’s 2013 American Indian Population and Labor Force Report, up to 47 percent of Natives who live and work in South Dakota earn wages below poverty level.

Running Strong for American Indian Youth, one of the nation’s leading Native support charities, reports that two of the poorest counties in the United States encompass Indian reservations - some communities languish with 85 percent of adults unemployed.

Wilson said the television exposé drew a huge humanitarian response nationwide that inundated Pine Ridge but left poorer and more isolated communities in the cold. NRF concentrates on

providing those forgotten populations with donations of warm clothing, shoes, food and toys.

"Access is the biggest problem for the people out there," Wilson said. The poorest communities are spread apart. Residents who lack jobs cannot afford vehicles and public transportation is sparse to nonexistent.

For the past four years, Bobbie "BJ" Billie, of Big Cypress, who has lived off and on in South Dakota including Pine Ridge, has been the go-between for Seminole goodwill and the people who need help most. With help from friends in the region, Billie connects one-on-one with the community and personally sees that needy families are served face-to-face. Nothing goes to waste.

Tribal members last year donated enough goods to brim two units in a local Hollywood storage facility and some cargo haulers hitched to personal trucks.

This year's collection is in dire need of men's warm clothing and sturdy shoes for all genders and ages. Flip-flops, sandals and summer shorts are not functional in the upper Midwest weather and terrain.

"Think winter, think warm. We always need blankets and throws, too," Wilson said.

Non-perishable food, such as canned goods, dry macaroni products and cereal, is additionally needed. Also, toys and school supplies will be accepted. Bowers said collection boxes will be placed in administration buildings, but volunteers are also willing to pick up donations at homes or other locations.

Last year, Tribal members Christopher Billie and Obadiah Osceola trekked the nearly 2,150-mile course in a 24-foot diesel truck filled with cartons packed with clothing, shoes, food and toys to Rapid City, South Dakota where they met Bobbie Billie.

Christopher Billie said the duo was slammed with a snow storm and persistent engine trouble during the four-stop journey to Red Scaffold, Dupree and Cherry Creek on the Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation and finally to tiny Red Shirt just outside of Badlands National Park north of Pine Ridge.

The planned five-day mission that began on Dec. 12 became a nine-day quest.

"It was unreal. It was freezing. We could barely see through the snow - it was a whiteout - and were stuck in a truck for nine days. Once, we had to pull over and check into a roadside motel. We were afraid we would be stranded there," Christopher Billie said. "But would I do it again? Yes, it was worth it."

At each stop, the group was met by volunteers and recipients who unloaded the truck and then organized the donations. Christopher Billie said he was moved by the gratitude that people showed them, but they did not engage very much.

"People were grateful. There were adults and kids who were like, 'You guys came all the way from Florida for us?' It was something to see but we stayed humble. We did our job and went to the next stop," Christopher Billie said.

Wilson said this year's goods will also be delivered by Christmas. Money raised from the quilt raffle will go toward truck fuel and packing supplies but outright donations of boxes, reinforced packing tape, magic markers and gas cards will be accepted happily.

Sorting and packing will begin Nov. 14. The raffle drawing will take place Nov. 16 in Hollywood.

Ticket holders need not be present to win.

To help, contact:

Big Cypress and Immokalee:

Alice Billie

863-677-1469  

Esther Gopher

954-304-1892   stop in the Big Cypress SMP office

Brighton:

Charlotte Burgess

863-634-8924   visit her at the Brighton Casino

Hollywood:

Wanda Bowers

954-444-9827   visit the Secretary's office in Hollywood

Jennifer "Ebo" Osceola

954-410-3255  

Gloria Wilson

954-253-6877  

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