

Chelsea Curtis

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Another small volunteer group delivers food to elders out of closed church

Around the corner and down the street from the Chinle Chapter House sits Memorial Baptist Church, which has been closed during the pandemic but gives refuge to a small nonprofit providing COVID-19 aid to the community.

[Chinle Planting Hope](#) was formed in 2016 by a group of five women. They aimed to enrich the community by leading a volunteer program made up of residents from the area. They also aspired to complete several projects, including a community playground and a public library.

"I've been here all my life, but growing up I always wanted to get out of here, I thought I could have a better life elsewhere," said Charmaine Tsosie, president of the organization. "Then I had a child when I was 16, and he just changed my whole perspective on life and how precious Diné people are and how we should take pride in who we are. So, when I met these ladies, our outlook was to enrich our people and our community here, to encourage and cultivate dreams here."

But as COVID-19 began ravaging the country, the group halted operations and refocused their attention on the community's most vulnerable, its elders.

In collaboration with the Chinle Senior Center, [they were able to raise nearly \\$65,000](#) to deliver to elders about 500 food baskets between April and August, 100 more on Thanksgiving and another 100 planned for Christmas. The organization also helped launch a food bank at the senior center that they say will continue to operate long after the virus was gone.

"It's the best thing we can do right now for our elderly to keep them here with us longer," said Janice Dunn, the organization's vice president, as she stood in the center of the church filled with dry goods and cleaning supplies. "We always say the elderly hold all of our stories, which we pass onto our kids, and they taught us everything that we know so it's really important that we keep them safe."



Chinle Planting Hope is again looking toward the future, brainstorming ways to continue enriching a community forever transformed by the deadly virus.

After the organization's efforts were mentioned in [a May New York Times article](#), they were contacted by four educators and retired professors from California who offered to write a business plan for a mobile library.

Having grown up an avid reader in Chinle, where the closest library was about 70 miles away, a local public library had been a dream of Charmaine Tsosie's, especially now that she had four children of her own.

"It's a dream come true," she said. "We can't have our building yet but having a mobile library is a step toward building up our children and creating that love for reading, learning and opening up a new world for them."

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The goal of the "R.E.A.D. in Beauty" Bookmobile was to encourage children to read and strengthen literacy skills. About 67% of third graders and 89% of high schoolers in Chinle last year lacked reading proficiency, according to the business plan.

A [GoFundMe campaign for the bookmobile](#) raised nearly \$10,000 of its \$25,000 goal. Once met, the organization plans to purchase a cargo van to house up to 3,000 books, art supplies and computer and charging stations.

"I just want to say how proud I am of the Navajo people, our nation, for being resilient. Everybody uses that word a lot but it's so true," Charmaine Tsosie said. "There's just so many factors that play into how easy it'd be to just give up and throw in the towel. But we don't, the people don't, we try to make it work and we try to keep going."

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