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Chiropractors play Santa for Fort Peck with 6,000 Christmas gifts

By RICH PETERSON
For the Tribune

POPLAR — Larry Hamilton Jr., a fifth-grader at Brockton elementary school, got an early Christmas present Thursday and was able to put it to immediate use.

Inside the school's gym, his newly unwrapped basketball immediately hit the floor before he shot into a hoop five feet away.

"This is a surprise. It's such a cool present," Hamilton said, before letting a second shot fly.

The black and red basketball came from a pile of 6,000 Christmas gifts brought to the Fort Peck Reservation this week by New Renaissance, a national chiropractic organization determined to make social and economic changes on America's Indian reservations.

Chiropractors and New Renaissance members Ed Plentz of the Detroit area, and Kevin Pallis of Boston, came to Fort Peck to personally deliver the gifts to each student, Indian and nonIndian, at Poplar, Brockton, Wolf Point and Frazer schools.

"If we don't take care of our children, who's gonna take care of the reservation or the world when we're gone," Plentz said.

Each of the 80 chiropractors active in the organization collected the presents from their staffs and patients throughout the country. Plentz and Pallis were expecting between 2,500 and 3,000 gifts to be collected and shipped to Poplar.

But when they arrived at a warehouse in Poplar Wednesday night, there were 6,000 gifts waiting to be distributed across the reservation.

"Wow. It's been just amazing. Our people really embraced this and went for it," Plentz said.

The organization spent about \$10,000 shipping the items to Poplar. Among the wrapped items were coats, athletic shoes, sports equipment, dolls, clothing and candy.

Gifts were also given to every teacher.

"This donation is just so impressive," said Ken Smoker Jr., of the Fort Peck Tribal Health department, who's also organized the effort on the Montana side. "The intent is to bring a smile to every child's face."

The chiropractors' connection to Fort Peck began several years ago when the organization was looking to recruit students from Third World countries for chiropractic school. The organization would select one student each from several countries, pay for their education and set them up with an office in their home countries. But that changed after meeting several tribal educators in Colorado, who told the chiropractors that their services were much needed on reservations, too.

"We decided to stay in this country and go to the true founding fathers of the United States. That's how we ended up coming to the reservation," Plentz said.

New Renaissance also selected Brandi Charette, 24, of Wolf Point, to attend chiropractic school in Georgia this January. When she graduates and returns to the reservation, the organization will have an office and cultural center waiting for her.

While Charette is in school, Plentz and Pallis will frequently return to Fort Peck to deliver motivational speeches to students and check up on the progress of the chiropractic office and cultural center. They want the presence of New Renaissance felt at Fort Peck while Charette is away.

"We really want these kids to see that they can leave the reservation, get an education, and come back and do what they want," Plentz said. "We just want to see them light up."