

By Michael Haederle | August 24, 2020

Field Notes

HERO Helen Tso Helps Shiprock Area Food Access Coalition Partner With Donor to Promote Healthy Diets

In the spring of 2019, Wendy Stires, senior vice president of Principal Giving and Regional Development at The University of New Mexico Foundation, was contacted by an anonymous donor who was interested in addressing Native American health disparities.

“He and I had a conversation about the kinds of things he wanted to support,” she recalls. Stires reached out to Helen Tso, a Farmington, N.M.-based Health Extension Regional Officer (HERO) with the UNM Office for Community Health, to seek her input.

Tso, who holds a degree in community health from UNM and is a member of the Navajo Nation, told Stires that access to fresh produce and healthy food choices were pressing issues for people living along the San Juan River in northwestern New Mexico.

Tso also had close connections with the Shiprock Area Food Access Coalition, a group founded in September 2018 by pediatrician Lydia Kim and nutritionist Jenna Cope, from the Northern Navajo Medical Center, to provide local residents with better-quality food choices.

“When this opportunity came across they then talked through the ideas they wanted to see funded and move forward,” Tso said. “The big idea was to develop a food hub that would be located in Shiprock that would serve not only the farmers in Shiprock but in the surrounding river corridor.”

Stires took Tso’s recommendation back to her donor, who agreed to support the food hub by providing a refrigeration unit for local growers to store their perishable produce – carrots, onions and potatoes, as well as shelf-stable items like corn, squash, and melons. The Shiprock Food Hub will partner with the neighboring San Juan College Harvest Food Hub network to make healthy ingredients available year-round in the community.



The donor also agreed to fund in-person cooking classes at the local farmer’s market led by local chefs who demonstrated healthy recipes. Since the COVID pandemic reached the state, that project is being converted to a video instruction format.

Kim said the food access coalition arose from a widely shared interest in a healthier diet. “Many community members feel passionate about access to healthy food and water,” she said, “But we weren’t seeing a lot of collaboration.”

When Tso approached the group it opened up a universe of new possibilities, she said.

“She asked us a coalition to identify any projects that could benefit the most in terms of funding – if we had won the lottery, what would our dream projects be,” Kim said. “Helen is such a rock star, and she’s so cool, and just a community advocate.”

Kim said her concerns about encouraging healthy diets emerged in part from seeing children in her clinic who were overweight or obese and wondering whether their families had access to healthy food.

“When you leave the clinic and go to the grocery store what does your shopping list look like?” Kim said. “Being able to buy what makes a healthy diet – that in itself is one of the pieces that’s missing. I definitely feel that the Foundation has given us a bigger platform to be able to make an impact in that field.”

To support the work of the UNM Office for Community Health HEROs program, donations may be made to the Drs. Arthur and Ellen Kaufman Community Health/HEROs Fund at the UNM Foundation.