

## [ Music ]

**Donovan Quintero:** The unsung heroes, they are the ones who keep the world going, as far as I'm concerned. They make everybody look good, and I've always appreciated that. Out here, the saying goes, "It's a small world." You know, for Indigenous people in this country, it's an even smaller world.

**Cécile Ganteaume:** Hello from the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian. I'm Cécile Ganteaume, curator of the exhibition *Developing Stories: Native Photographers in the Field*. This exhibition presents photo essays by Native photojournalists Donovan Quintero, Russel Albert Daniels, and Tailyr Irvine. Each created their photo essay in collaboration with the NMAI. And while each of these photographers has very distinct photographic styles and approaches to their work, they are united in two fundamental objectives: One is to portray stories that capture the diversity and complexity of Native people's contemporary lives. And the second objective is to bring to light social justice issues impacting Native people's lives.

I am delighted today to be talking to Donovan Quintero, an award-winning photojournalist and creator of the photo essay *The COVID-19 Outbreak in the Navajo Nation*. Donovan's work has been recognized by the Society for Environmental Journalism as well as by the Native American Journalists Association. He has worked for the *Navajo Times* since 2005. I think it's well worth pointing out that the *Navajo Times* is one of a minority of independent tribal newspapers, which is neither owned nor controlled financially or editorially by its tribal government. Now, over the last year, a number of reporters from mainstream news outlets have traveled to the Navajo Nation Reservation for one day or two, a few at most, to report on the spread of COVID-19 there. Donovan Quintero, who was born, raised, and lives on the Navajo Reservation, has covered the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus on the reservation weekly, if not daily, for the *Navajo Times* for one year. He has covered the countless ways in which COVID-19 has impacted Navajo people's everyday lives, the preexisting issues that have worsened the virus's impact, the challenges faced by all branches and departments of the Navajo Nation tribal government, and how Native people

throughout the reservation have responded to the spread of the pandemic. Donovan joins us today to talk about his experiences over the last year and his remarkable photo essay, which is truly an insider's view of how the Navajo Nation has been put to the test, if you will, by the worst pandemic in more than 100 years. Donovan, welcome. It's a real honor to be talking to you today.

**Donovan Quintero:** Hello. Thank you for that. Thank you for the introduction as well.

**Cécile Ganteaume:** Well, I'm looking forward to hearing you reflect on your experiences and on your series of remarkable photographs that you selected for your photo essay. But before we dive into that, let's start with you telling us just a little bit about yourself. Tell us something, if you would, about your upbringing, your family, where you went to school.

**Donovan Quintero:** My name is Donovan Quintero. I was born on the reservation and lived for most of my life on the reservation. I grew up without running water or electricity for a portion of my life, a young part of my life, actually. And I grew up just herding sheep and getting water for my late grandmother's corn on a daily basis, which was very hard work. And pretty much that's just how I grew up as a young boy. So, my first language was Navajo. And I remember, as a young boy, hearing this strange language. Of course, later I would come to realize that was English. And I would hear my family talking English, but at the time I couldn't understand what they were saying. And that used to scare me, it used to frighten me, because I didn't have no idea what they were talking about. Part of my life, I grew up on the reservation. And then, eventually I moved to Farmington, New Mexico, where I graduated from Farmington High School. And that's pretty much where I began. I actually joined the military from there.

**Cécile Ganteaume:** That was the U.S. Navy that you were in, right?

**Donovan Quintero:** That's correct, the Navy. I was in the Navy, and I did my tour there, and did my work there, and I came back out. And basically, from there, I just started exploring the country.

**Cécile Ganteaume:** Well, what was it that drew you to photography and to deciding on photojournalism as a career?

**Donovan Quintero:** Well, you know, part of my military training was just looking through the camera. And when I first looked through the viewfinder, everything made sense to me. I can't explain that. It just came naturally to me. It felt right. It felt normal. I felt very comfortable. And pretty much, that's where it took off from. It wasn't until after the military that I really started exploring what photography really means. Photography was my way of expressing the world, the world I see, how I see things, and so on.

**Cécile Ganteaume:** Well, when did you invest in your first serious camera? And what was it?

**Donovan Quintero:** It was my Nikon, FM2 Nikon. It's an all-manual camera. But that was back, I believe it was in 2000. I still have the camera with me. You know, when I first got into the business, it was transitioning over to digital. Everything was still film. And so that's where I got the Nikon FM2. It's a film camera. It's an all-manual camera. And when I first started realizing this is something I really wanted to do, I bought a little digital camera that could fit into an Altoids can. And to please publications out there, that's pretty much what I started using. But the film, though, was always something I really enjoyed. You know, that's when I decided to live in my car, actually. I lived in my car for about two and a half years, and I traveled the country. And a lot of times, I would sit in parking lots trying to sell my photographs. I'd sell them for a dollar, two dollars, of different sceneries and so on. And that's pretty much how I started photography. I believed in it that much, to where I had something that I really started doing. And eventually, I felt that I had gathered enough photographs that, at the time, I considered good enough, and that's how I started my portfolio. I began my portfolio in that fashion. And that's when I started visiting newspapers and saying, "Hey, this is what I have, and this is what I could do for you. I'm willing to work for pennies, you know, even free."

**Cécile Ganteaume:** So, Donovan, tell us about Paul Natonabah. Will you tell us about his work with the *Navajo Times* and his stature in your eyes and his significance to your career?

**Donovan Quintero:** Paul Natonabah, we call him Mr. *Navajo Times*. He's, as far as I'm concerned, the greatest Navajo photographer that's ever lived. I mean, he had these humongous shoes to fill, which I still try to fill. I don't know if I'm doing a great job at that. But, he's been there for 40 years, 40-plus years. He's retired now. A number of years back, he began approaching me, asking, or letting me know that "I'm not going to be able to do this forever." And I gave it a lot of thought. After a while, I began realizing that I needed to come home, because I'm Indigenous, I'm Navajo, I'm Diné. And being out there in the world, I began realizing there are not enough Native journalists out here to cover Native news or Indigenous news. And the more I started talking to editors and publications out there, the more I began to understand that I needed to come home, because I felt that everybody else was telling their people's stories, and I needed to tell my stories, my people's stories, and that's what prompted me to come home. And that's where I learned of Paul Natonabah. Here's somebody telling our people's stories. He's documenting it with his camera. And that's something I always try to do. I try to follow his footsteps. And I try to continue that legacy, telling our Navajo people's stories. And that's pretty much where I began. And one day he came back, and that's when I started working with him as a freelancer. I showed him my work, and he was pretty honest about it. He says, "Hey, this is good stuff, but I could tell you still have a lot to learn. If you keep it up, you'll get better. This is the only way you can do it. There's just no other way you can get around it. You just have to keep doing it, and you'll get better." Which is absolutely true, and that's something I continue doing. And then, one day, as I began working with him more and more and more as a freelancer, that's when he says, "Hey, you should think about coming home."

**Cécile Ganteaume:** Wow. So, he was both your mentor and your role model?

**Donovan Quintero:** That's correct.

**Cécile Ganteaume:** Not a bad mentor or role model to have. Donovan, you told me in one of our early conversations that you often use an iPhone when doing your work. Will you tell us why you prefer taking photographs with an iPhone? Not always, but in many instances.

**Donovan Quintero:** You know, with newspaper work, the quality of the photo doesn't have to be the greatest. And on top of that, it's a lot easier to approach people. When I'm talking to people and I have a small device in my hand, everybody can relate to it, especially now. So, that's why I started using the phone. It's a lot easier to work with, too. I use my phone to interview. I write stories these days, and so I use it to interview and record my conversations with people. I also use it to photograph events and so on. And my cameras, whenever I do use them, people seem to be more intimidated by my cameras as opposed to my phone.

**Cécile Ganteaume:** Okay, well, let's now turn to your work covering the pandemic in your photo essay. Your photo essay includes 44 images. The earliest one was taken on January 10th, 2020. And the most recent one was taken on January 12th, 2021. In your own words, Donovan, what's your photo essay, with its 44 images taken over the course of one year, what's it all about?

**Donovan Quintero:** First off, my condolences to everyone out there who has lost a loved one to COVID-19. It's a horrible disease. It's a pandemic that we're still dealing with worldwide. So, my condolences, again, to everyone out there who's lost a loved one. What I've been covering out here with the pandemic is basically just how the Navajo Nation has been dealing with it, and the people, the medical folks out there, police as well, and how that pandemic has really affected us already in so many ways. What I found out was that a lot of people have been getting by, a lot of us who have lived in impoverished conditions prior to the pandemic. I began finding out that people were doing whatever they could to get by. Some people would attend certain events just so they could eat some food, and that's how they got their meal. But as the pandemic hit us, they were not able to do that. And then they resorted to hunting rabbits and so on. And that's just one thing I began to understand, how hard the pandemic hit us. And it's just by seeing and hearing people's stories, too. Like I said, I do write stories, and being

impacted myself by it. And quite a few people I photographed and interviewed for my stories have passed on either because of COVID or because of complications related to COVID. And, you know, for myself personally, that hits me, because that is not the reason why I started covering the pandemic.

**Cécile Ganteaume:** So, Donovan, if you wouldn't mind sharing with us, what were some of your early assignments covering the COVID-19 pandemic? And where did these assignments take you to?

**Donovan Quintero:** When the pandemic hit, nobody knew what it was. I certainly didn't know what it was either. And then, when I started hearing about how this was affecting us, that's when I began to say, "Okay, I need to get out there and start documenting this." And the first community that's reported to have been hit on the reservation is, I'll say it in my native tongue, Tsiikchin Bii' Tó. That's how you say it in Navajo. In English, it's called Chilchinbeto. That's the community where COVID-19 was first reported to come to the Navajo Nation. I remember driving out there thinking, okay, this is what I'm going to do. I'm going to just stay in my vehicle. I'm going to roll my window down, just to photograph. Then I'm going to take off, roll my window up, and then take off as quickly as I can. And when I got out there, the small community was just practically a ghost town. So, Navajo police officers parked along the main road there that connects to the community. They didn't say anything. I drove through there, fully expecting to be stopped and told that I'm not allowed to go in there. But surprisingly, I drove through there. I went to the community. I parked several places, and I took some photographs. I never got out of my vehicle. Of course, I was wearing a mask and so on. And I left. But thinking that this is where the pandemic began for us, the Navajo Nation, it was a surreal feeling. At the time, I never thought that we would reach more than 1,200 people losing their lives to this disease. And for our people, that's a lot of people. We're a little over 327,000 strong. We live off and on the reservation. And so, losing more than 1,200 of our relatives is a big deal for us, because language and culture is such a big thing for us. A lot of people, our people, our relatives, our grandfathers and grandmothers, have lost their lives to this. So, a lot of stories, our language, our songs and prayers and ceremonies have left with them as well. And that's where we're at now.

**Cécile Ganteaume:** Well, Donovan, the gravity of the pandemic is palpable in virtually every one of your photographs. And they are all very meaningful in human terms, whether it's of a police officer in full protective clothing being further prepared by a fellow officer when he's about to enter a house with a suspected COVID-19 death, or of an emergency room nurse sitting at home alone on her couch. Will you tell us about the photograph of the emergency room nurse Tyra Street? How did you meet her and learn her story?

**Donovan Quintero:** At the time, everybody was still learning about the type of symptoms people should look out for. There were these new symptoms that no one has ever heard of. Like, for instance, losing your sense of taste and smell was a new symptom that no one has ever heard of. And, of course, the term "long-hauler" started coming up. I started asking around, nurses that I knew, doctors I know, if there's anyone who might be experiencing that. Would they be interested in talking to me? And so, that's pretty much how I connected with Tyra Street. She is someone who's actually dedicated to helping people and so on. And she's an Oglala Sioux. She started working at the Phoenix Indian Medical Center. It's an IHS facility, an Indian Health Service facility. And she was working in the emergency room at the time. And she was, of course, obviously a frontline worker. She first contracted the virus back in March last year. And she was still experiencing the symptoms months later. She considered herself a long-hauler. And, of course, that's true today. She's still dealing with a lot of the symptoms that came from contracting COVID-19. I was trying to understand who she is as a nurse, as a frontliner, and, of course, as a person, as a human being who cares about other people. And she constantly has put her life on the line for people for a number of years before COVID. I began speaking to her, thinking of her from that perspective. Here's somebody I'm speaking to who's always putting herself, her life, on the line so that she can save others. And that's the story I really tried to write on her behalf. There's a photograph that's going to be part of the exhibit. She's touching her forehead. Her eyes are closed. And she seems to be straining. And she was. She was speaking to me about her symptoms, and then she kept forgetting words. And that's one of the other symptoms, too, that's related to COVID. People forget. She was forgetting and it was affecting her mind. So, the

photograph I took of her is her trying to remember a word. And she was getting frustrated. And that's when I photographed her and documented her doing that.

**Cécile Ganteaume:** You include several images of health care workers and first responders in your photo essay. And I know that one of the images that you thought was really important to include was of a housekeeper. Her name's Edith Sherman. And she's sanitizing an emergency room. Why was this image so important to you?

**Donovan Quintero:** I'm always for the unsung hero, the quote, unquote little people. Of course, no disrespect at all to the frontline workers, doctors, and nurses out there and EMTs and police officers. They've been getting the spotlight. But really, it's people like Edith. For instance, at the hospital there, Rehoboth McKinley Christian Hospital, she was constantly keeping the place clean. The walls, the ceilings, the floor, the counters, the computers. I've always respected that about people. Again, like I said, the unsung heroes, they are the ones who keep the world going, as far as I'm concerned. They make everybody look good, and I've always appreciated that. Whether it's a teacher's aide, or a custodian, or an assistant, even an intern. These people strengthen the backbone of an organization. The story there was about the doctor, the hospital wanted to let people know, "You've got to take care of yourself. You've got to take care of your heart, especially now during COVID." Everybody's at home, and they were just trying to let the people know, "Hey, come on in. We're safe. We're clean. Let's make sure your health is good, make sure your heart's okay." And that's when I noticed Edith. Again, no disrespect to the nurses and doctors, but at the time, they were sitting there at their desks on the chairs, and Edith was the only one working. The frontline workers are there to save our lives, to make sure that we're okay and healthy. But the only reason why they can do that is because of people like Edith.

**Cécile Ganteaume:** Well, Donovan, I love that you quoted her in the caption for the photograph. You quoted her as saying, "People trust us that come out here to the hospital. They trust us with their lives, to be taken care of." I think you honored her very nicely through your photograph of her. Donovan, certainly one of the ways

in which every single Navajo person on the reservation experienced the pandemic was through the many curfews and lockdowns that were imposed upon them. Will you tell us about the extent of the curfews that people have had to live with throughout the pandemic? And in doing so, will you talk about your photograph of the Navajo tribal police conducting a checkpoint? I believe it's on Highway 264.

**Donovan Quintero:** At the beginning of this pandemic, the tribal government actually imposed that back in March. It was part of the public health orders that curfews would be implemented right away. At the time, it was—it still is, actually—from 9:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m. on a nightly basis. So, during those times, non-essential people were not allowed to be outside or conducting non-essential business. If you were considered an essential worker or doing something essential, like getting food or going to the hospital for emergency purposes, then you would be allowed out to conduct your business. But otherwise, people have to stay home. And it's been like that since last year. We've been in this nightly curfew from, like I said, 9:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m. And that's for all Navajo Nation residents. The police did conduct quite a few checkpoints related to the pandemic, related to the curfew. Mostly, though, the checkpoints were for educational purposes only. They handed out masks, hand sanitizer, and any information related to COVID-19, and reminded people to stay home, that there are curfews in effect, public health orders in effect, until further notice. Of course, since we've been getting our vaccinations, so far the 57-hour weekend lockdowns or curfews have been lifted for now. I'm sure that if another surge was to happen, it would be brought back. But right now, we are still in a nightly curfew.

**Cécile Ganteaume:** Donovan, throughout the entire United States, the economic impact of COVID-19 has been enormous. But we all know that the economic consequences of the pandemic have hurt some people much more than others. And we know, for example, that many Navajo have been hurt by the shutdown of the gaming industry. But it's not only the shutdown of large industries that have hurt Navajo people. Will you tell us about the artist Ernest Sleuth and how the pandemic has impacted his well-being? And tell us, please, about the photograph you took of him in a trailer. It's an image taken from an unexpected vantage point. We certainly get a sense of the scene and, importantly, of the quality of Sleuth's

work. But Sleuth is obscured. He's half hidden, in fact. Will you talk about this image as you tell us about Mr. Sleuth?

**Donovan Quintero:** A lot of people, a lot of Navajos out here during the pandemic . . . I had gotten more declines. People do not want to be identified. They don't want to be shamed, you know, or labeled. So, many, many times, I should say, during this pandemic, people have declined to have their photograph taken. Mr. Sleuth is an elderly gentleman who is a bead worker. I was actually with the local chapter officials who were checking on elderly within their area. And he was one of the persons that they worked with on a regular basis. And on that day, they went to check on him to make sure he was okay. It was snowing and cold at the time, and they wanted to make sure that he had enough wood. The trailer that he lives in doesn't belong to him. It belongs to one of his relatives, because he's actually homeless. But the beadwork that he does, being an artisan out here, a lot of artisans have been affected by this pandemic, and that's what happened to him. He wasn't able to sell his work like he used to, like he usually does prior to the pandemic. So, he's been struggling to stay employed, put food on the table for himself, and that's why the chapter officials got involved and they began to help him with food and wood. I asked him if I could take his picture. Of course, out here on the Navajo Nation, it's respectful that you ask to take a photograph before you just start snapping away. Out here, we still have our culture, we still have our prayers and ceremonies and our language, of course, and with that comes our teachings. We still have a lot of our teachings. And respect is something that we always talk about. And it certainly was spoken to me by my late grandmother. With that said, I asked Mr. Sleuth if I could photograph him. He says, "Not really, but you could take a picture of my work and me drinking some coffee." And that's where the photograph came from. I was being respectful of his request.

[ Music ]

**Cécile Ganteaume:** Folks, we'll take a short break and return in a moment to our *Developing Stories* conversation with Navajo photojournalist Donovan Quintero.

## [ Music ]

Donovan, I would be remiss if I did not ask you to talk about three powerful and poignant photographs you made of Officer Michael Lee's funeral. Will you please tell us who Officer Lee was and how he died?

**Donovan Quintero:** Out here, the saying goes, "It's a small world." You know, for Indigenous people in this country, it's an even smaller world. There are only so many officers that work out here, protecting the Navajo Nation. And Officer Lee was one of those officers. And I never really met him in person, but I had a couple of phone conversations with him regarding Toys for Tots. That was at the latter part of his career, before he succumbed to COVID-19. That was one of his passions, to get toys for kids. And that's something that he really was involved with at the time. And that's how I got to know him, just through, like I said again, phone conversations. He was a gentleman, just always respectful. And he loved kids. I could hear the passion in his voice when it came to working on getting as many toys as possible for children. When I had heard that he was the first peace officer in Arizona to succumb to COVID-19, I was a little bit hesitant at first, because I felt, I really am close to law enforcement out here. I respect them so much. I mean, they cover a lot of ground, and they're never thanked, hardly ever thanked, always criticized. So, I've always been a big supporter of law enforcement. But I felt that, being a newspaper, that that is news. The first peace officer in Arizona, who just happens to be a Navajo police officer, succumbs to COVID-19. And so, that's pretty much how I approached the story, with lots of respect and so on.

**Cécile Ganteaume:** Well, that respect is quite evident. Donovan, a great many of your photographs are visually striking and do make an indelible impact. One of them is certainly your photograph of the makeshift classroom a father built for his daughter. I believe it is in Fish Point. Will you set the scene for listeners, please, and tell us what is going on in this photograph?

**Donovan Quintero:** There's a saying out here in Navajo: *T'ááhwí ajít'éego*. That means, basically, in English, "Do it yourself." And he certainly did do that for his

children, you know? So, they live in a valley. It's a place called Fish Point. It's a small community. From the larger community we know as Chinle, it's about maybe 20 miles west of Chinle. And it's nestled just along the side of the Black Mesa. And him and his family live there in this area. And it's right in a valley where they have no phone service, they have no Wi-Fi, and there's a hill right next to their home. On top of the hill is where they get service. I mean, it's not the greatest service, but it's still service. Of course, when the pandemic came, everybody tried to figure out how to help one another. And the school system gave out tablets and mobile hotspots, so that students could utilize it for school, for online schooling. Of course, this didn't work. The hotspot did not work at their home. So, you know, it's usually pretty windy out here. It's either slightly windy or very windy. Rarely, especially where they live, are there any calm days. So, the structure that he created was to block some of that wind away, block wind off so that his children can be comfortable. So, what he did was, he decided to build this little circular structure out there made of stones. And he grabbed the table, and that became the desk for his daughter. Of course, I went to revisit him since then recently, and he built a structure. He made it even larger. He dug into the ground. And he actually put a stove there, a wood stove, so that his children and the other local kids could utilize that and keep warm while they're studying. The only reason why, like I said again, is so that they could text with the teacher and be able to talk to the teacher to figure out the lessons for the day. So, resiliency, I think, is an understatement. We are such a resilient people. And to me, he exemplifies that, he defines that, what he did for his children.

**Cécile Ganteaume:** It is a remarkable story. And it's an arresting photograph. Donovan, another one of your photographs that I find arresting is the image that you took of a church revival meeting being shut down. For me, its impact at first seems to lie in its great clarity, in the razor-sharp focus of its huge green-and-white-striped tent top that you see from within, of all the empty folding chairs, and of the traces of countless footprints in this expanse of sandy soil that's the floor of the tent. But while all this tactile detail is captured, the special significance of the photograph is really, I think, the eerie emptiness of the tent, except for two individuals seated facing each other way off in the distance. It's a photograph with

a story that, we suspect, lies in what we're not seeing, what's not captured in the photograph. Will you tell us about this remarkable image?

**Donovan Quintero:** Sure. The two individuals you see in the photograph are a pastor and the fire marshal, the city fire marshal. At the time, the State of New Mexico had implemented no gathering within a structure. And the tent, of course, was part of a service that they were about to provide. And the fire marshal, at the time, was visiting with the pastor to let them know that inside gathering would not be allowed. And so, they were figuring out how they can provide church service for people. And the solution they came up with was that people would stay in their vehicles outside of the tent. And that's where their service would be conducted. People needed to stay in their vehicles, wear a mask, and social distance. And those were the requirements that they had to go by. So, the footprints basically are people who came together to put the tent up. And I did find that striking. I thought, this is part of reality now. I thought, at the time, that we're no longer able to gather like before. We still don't know when or if that will happen, at least here in our area. I did find that striking that the chairs were put out for a good reason. But because of the pandemic, they were not able to be utilized.

**Cécile Ganteaume:** It really is a striking photo. Donovan, you also include a photograph of a nitrile glove factory in your photo essay. And I think our listeners would really like to know about this, about the existence of this critically important medical-grade glove factory that's staffed by Navajo people. Will you tell us about that?

**Donovan Quintero:** It is situated on the Navajo Nation, just east of Gallup, New Mexico. Actually, at the time, the owner, I believe, Mr. Mike Lee, was telling me . . . I wrote a story on that. So, they were having a hard time keeping up with orders, which came from all over the country. New York, New Jersey, he said, were some of his customers. Of course, here in the Navajo Nation as well. The business is actually not that big. He had been trying to enlarge it. He was trying to make it bigger so that he could make more gloves. The story for that one was that the first, I believe, a million and a half gloves were going to be given to the Navajo Nation, because, at the time, there was a very severe supply shortage for frontline

workers. And nitrile gloves, medical-grade type gloves, were one of the shortages that frontline workers were dealing with. Seeing all of the employees there just working away, I mean, again, resiliency. Let's do this. As far as I'm concerned, that defined it, just to see the gloves being manufactured and being created. And here are the employees, again, the unsung heroes making this happen, so that frontline workers can do their jobs.

**Cécile Ganteaume:** Absolutely. Donovan, I think part of what adds greatly to the richness of your photo essay are the images of people going about their everyday lives during the pandemic, pretty much like you just said. Whether they're of people voting during the 2020 presidential election, or participating in a Black Lives Matter rally, or unsheltered relatives asleep in front of a store in Gallup. Would you choose one of these photographs to tell us why its subject was important to you and why you wanted to include it in your photo essay?

**Donovan Quintero:** Documenting unsheltered relatives has been a passion of mine ever since I began doing this work. Our people, my people, the Navajo people have . . . alcoholism is such a big thing on the reservation. I think many of us here on the Navajo Nation have family members, and certainly, my family is no exception. My family have struggled with alcohol addiction and so on. So, it's always been a passion of mine. How can we fix this? It's easy to identify the problem. But it's even harder to talk about solutions. So, throughout the years, I've always documented and spoken to many, many, many unsheltered relatives out there on the streets, struggling to survive, struggling to find money so that they could continue appeasing their addictions. Scenes like that, where our relatives are sleeping on concrete sidewalks, and the photograph you're talking about has a mural in the background. It's a drawing. It's a trading post. It depicts a harmonious way of life, Navajo life. We call it *hózhó*. In the back, in the mural, you see people smiling. They're wearing their jewelry. They're very astute looking. And then, of course, the reality is you see relatives sleeping on the concrete sidewalk there. That's really two very stark and distinct depictions of who we are. While it is true that we are proud and we have our language and culture, and that we do live that way, we also are struggling with addictions, like alcohol. And a lot of our relatives are succumbing to those addictions and are ending up on the

streets. And it especially was the case during the pandemic. Some of the things that many of our relatives had told me is that they weren't allowed to go home because of the pandemic. And some were even told to stay away until this pandemic is over.

**Cécile Ganteaume:** Well, your photograph really does capture a striking juxtaposition. And it's very effective. Donovan, now, I have just two more questions for you. The first is the Navajo Nation was perhaps the first Native Nation to receive COVID-19 vaccines. It's 2021, just over a year since the COVID-19 pandemic came to the reservation. How is the Navajo Nation's vaccination program progressing now?

**Donovan Quintero:** We are way ahead of everyone else. We have been vaccinating 16-year-old kids. Of course, that's as low as we can go for age groups. Again, we're a small group of people. And so far, more or less 190,000 people have gotten one of the doses or both of the doses. To be that far ahead of everyone else, you know, people smile, people feel good about that, people are proud of that. We kind of spoke about the casinos earlier. Because of the vaccinations, the casinos are starting to operate again. The ultimate aim here is to open back up 100%. Right now, they're operating at 25%.

**Cécile Ganteaume:** Well, I know they are anxious to get people back to work to get their paychecks coming back in. Now, lastly, Donovan, you begin your essay with an image of a comet making its way over the Chuska Mountains early one morning, either just before or at dawn. And you end your photo essay with an image of the San Francisco Peaks taken just as the sun is beginning to rise. Why did you want to bookend your photo essay with these two images?

**Donovan Quintero:** The comet, according to Navajo tradition, is considered an omen. It foretells bad things are coming. Part of my research into a couple of stories I wrote last year tells of that. Back in the 1840s, our relatives, our ancestors back then saw a comet in the sky, and it represents death. Our people began preparations for whatever was to come, back then. Another comet came around the time of the 1918 Spanish Influenza. That also foretold bad things were

to come for the Navajo people. When the comet came to us last year, at the beginning of the pandemic for us, I'm a traditional Navajo person, seeing this comet is not a good thing. Waking up in the morning, many of us wake up in the morning and we pray. And we pray facing the east with *tádídíín* or corn pollen. And we pray for a harmonious life. We pray for good things. We pray that we're going to have a good day and so on. Seeing this comet, this death in the sky, was not a good thing. So that's why I photographed that. I hope I photographed it in such a way that it was not supposed to represent beauty. It's not supposed to represent anything. I tried my best to envision myself standing at that area and praying. And I see this thing in the sky. That's why I photographed it.

Now, the mountain, *Dook'o'osííd*, is located on the western side of the reservation. As you said, in English it's San Francisco Peaks. It's one of our protectors. If you can imagine a cell, we have four main mountains. And within the four main mountains is the cell, what brings the cell to life. The four mountains protect that. They're the walls of our people. And this is where we come from. I was driving back from an assignment one day, and as I was driving, I started seeing those lights coming over the top of the area. And it had this beautiful color to it. As I kept driving, it started becoming more pronounced, and I felt I needed to stop. And I thought, okay, this is telling me something here. So, that's when I photographed that moment. And I sat there, and I just watched it, and I was praying when I was photographing it. Though this is a beautiful scenery, it's not about the scenery. This is about our mountain. This is about our protector to the west. And for us as Navajo people, we pray to the mountain, we pray to our protector. As I was praying, I was praying that the mountain would continue to protect us, protect our way, protect our language, protect us in general.

**Cécile Ganteaume:** That's very beautiful. Donovan, it's been fascinating talking to you. You've been great with your time. And it's been a real education listening to you. Thank you so very much.

**Donovan Quintero:** Thank you. Thank you again, Cécile.

## Developing Stories

NATIVE PHOTOGRAPHERS IN THE FIELD

**Cécile Ganteaume:** Folks, that was Navajo photojournalist, Donovan Quintero. His essay, *The COVID-19 Outbreak in the Navajo Nation*, is available online on the National Museum of the American Indian's website.

I'm NMAI curator Cécile Ganteaume. If you enjoyed this conversation, please look for our *Developing Stories* conversations with photographers Tailyr Irvine and Russel Albert Daniels. That's it for now. Thank you for joining us.

[ Music ]