

Remembering Grandma Begay

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This story could be told in a much shorter space if the person reading it knew the background already. Since it's unlikely that anyone who does know the background will ever read this, perhaps I should assume nothing and start at the beginning.

La Vida Mission serves the Navajo People (*Diné*) living in an area of northern New Mexico. I went there fresh out of college in 1969. My real goal at the time was not to work on an Indian reservation but to get some practical experience and then go on to study languages at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. That never happened, but it's what I had in mind when I first arrived at La Vida.

On one of my first town leaves in Farmington, I saw a copy of the Navajo New Testament in a store and purchased it as a curiosity. No harm in letting it occupy some space on a shelf. It was the 1956 edition.

My first job at LVM was as boys' dean – with a dozen residents, ages 5 through 15. What an adventure! The next year I taught grades 1-4 and the year after that did Bible work in the community.

Most of the people I visited were friendly – because that's just how they were and because by this time I was making an effort to learn their language. There was one family a few miles away on a mesa north of the mission, however, that did nothing to encourage mutual contact and I soon learned that it was better not to bother them. Their name was Begay.

Then one day a death occurred in the family. Not being close to them, I didn't know what had happened and was on town leave when the call came from someone at the mission saying there would be a funeral the next day. It was to be held out in the open, a few miles from the family's home.

That was part of the message. It went on to say that the family was asking if I would speak at the gravesite. The invitation came as a bit of a shock. It was already night by then, but I drove back out to the mission, got some rest, and started early the next morning to prepare a talk, which I gave first in Navajo, then in English.

That broke down all barriers. The Begays became some of my closest friends in the area. So this is how I met the rest of the family – including an elderly couple that called Grandma and Grandpa Begay. Over time we had a

number of experiences together that I'd love to relate, but doing that here would take us away from our story.

In January of 1973 I left La Vida to begin a Ph.D. program at the University of New Mexico, but on two later occasions was able to return for a working visit over the course of a summer.

My last summer at La Vida Mission was in 1976. I was teaching an extension course in Navajo linguistics for the University of New Mexico on site at Teec Nos Pos, west from Shiprock just over the state line into Arizona. It was a long drive but I didn't have to go there every day.

When the summer ended it was time to get back to Albuquerque. There were classes to take, and to teach, and a dissertation to finish. That's the background. Now here's the story:

As I drove away from the mission at the end of that summer I weighed what to do – whether to head straight back to the city or make a special trip one last time to say good-bye to Grandma Begay. It was a rough, winding road up to her place and it would take time I wasn't sure I had, but she was widowed by now and getting older. There was no guarantee that I would have a similar opportunity any time soon, so I decided to go ahead and make the visit. Other matters would have to wait.

I had crossed the wash and was starting up onto the mesa on the other side when I saw someone in the distance hurrying toward me on foot. It was Grandma. When I stopped to offer her a ride – either back home or on to the mission – she said I could take her home now, because she had been coming down to see me. She had woven a small rug for me and wanted to make sure I got it before leaving for the summer.

And so that morning we met half way. I was going up the mesa to see her and she, for her part, was coming down to see me.

That was many years ago. And no, I never saw her again. Grandma Begay is sleeping peacefully in Jesus now, waiting for the resurrection. May God bless her memory, her family, and her influence on everyone who knew her. She was one of God's special children. I love you, *Shimá Sání*.