AROUND THE CAPITAL

Board of Election Supervisors meeting

The Navajo Nation Board of Election Supervisors will meet today, Nov. 12, at 9 a.m. at the Quality Inn Business Complex, Conference Room 107, in Window Rock. Information: 1-800-775-8683

Commission on Navajo Government Development closure

The Commission on Navajo Government Development will be closed Nov. 12-13 due to staff attending a work session Nov. 13-14 at the Twin Arrows Navajo Casino in Flagstaff. Office will resume normal business hours Nov. 16. Information: 928-871-7214

VFW Tapaha/Bowman, Post 6789 meeting

The Veterans of Foreign Wars Tapaha/Bowman, Navajo Post 6789, will meet Saturday, Nov. 14, at 9 a.m. at Quality Inn in Window Rock. Information: Daniel Yazza, 928-206-3970.

Diabetes nutrition expo

The Navajo Nation Special Diabetes Project-Fort Defiance Service Area presents the Diabetes Nutrition Expo on Tuesday, Nov. 17, at the Navajo Nation Museum from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. There will be diabetes nutrition education, health booths and physical activity. Information: 505-786-2372 or www.nnsdp.org

DSR field office closure

Department for Self Reliance offices will be closing Nov. 16 at 12 p.m., and will remain closed until Nov. 18 due to staff attending a meeting. DSR Support Services Office in Window Rock will be in operation to offer limited services (928-810-8553). Normal business hours resume Nov. 19. Information: 866-347-2403

Artist: Raid on suspected fake Native art dealers 'a long time coming'

BY COLLEEN KEANE
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

ALBUQUERQUE - After receiving complaints that several southwestern shops were selling potentially fake Native American art, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service started an under-cover investigation two years ago to find out if the Indian Arts and Crafts Act (IACA) was being violated.

IACA prohibits the sale, display and marketing of any American goods that falsely suggest that they are Native American-made. The act covers all styles of American Indian art created after 1935.

Last month on Oct. 28, federal agents executed 15 search warrants at retail and wholesale shops, seized bank accounts, and conducted investigative interviews in four U.S. states, including New Mexico, and in the Philippines where the fake art was allegedly made.

New Mexico U.S. Attorney Damon Martinez announced the bust along with the arrests of three New Mexicans at a press conference Oct. 29. Those arrested include Nael Ali, Mohammad Abed Manasra, and Christina Bowen.

Ali is the owner of two Old Town jewelry stores, Gallery 8 and Galleria Azul, Bowen was a former store manager, and Manasra presented himself as a wholesaler of Native American jewelry.

According to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Special Agent in Charge Nicholas Chavez, the crackdown is entitled "Operation El Zuni".

"It's the largest investigation since the inception of the Indian Arts and Crafts Act because it crosses international waters," Chavez stated during the press conference.

Reflecting on the bust, renowned Native American artist Sam English (Turtle Mountain Chippewa) said, "It's been a long time coming."

English recalled how he had one of his images stolen and thousands of copies were duplicated and marketed. Over the years, as he traveled around the country, he talked to other Native American artists and learned that they had been ripped off too.

SPECIAL TO THE TIMES | COLLEEN KEANE

Indian Arts and Crafts Board Chairman Harry Pratt (left) and federal agent Nicholas Chavez (right) stand by as U.S. Attorney Damon Martinez announces the arrest of 3 New Mexicans who allegedly sold fake Native American art.

Without back up, he said that there was little they could do about it.

"There was never any money to monitor or investigate anything," he recalled.

But, he said, things have changed

"That was then, look what's happening now. It's historic," he said, referring to the raid and the arrests.

"It's huge that (the U.S. Attorney and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service) stepped in and made this happen. This is so much needed for the protection of the Indian Arts and Crafts Act," said Harvey Pratt, Chairman of the Indian Arts and Crafts Board (IACB), who traveled to New Mexico from his Washington, D.C. office to attend the announcement.

Pratt explained that the IACB relies on law enforcement agencies, both state and federal, to investigate violations of the IACA.

"I think this opens the door for future investigations. Maybe other agencies will see something occurring and (step in to) help" he said.

Weighing in, Camille Ferguson, executive director of the American Indian Alaska Native Tourism Association, stated in an email to the Times, "AIANTA applauds the enforcement of the Indian Arts and Crafts Act this week in New Mexico. Visitors to Indian Country are looking for an authentic experience, which includes purchasing Indian art that is made by real American Indian artists. The sale of fraudulent American Indian art negatively impacts the livelihood of tribal artists and cheats the visitor of a true experience of owning authentic art."

With federal charges pending, Gallery 8's doors in Old Town were wide open the afternoon of the press conference.

Several young women who acknowledged that they were associated with the shop, which has been there for many years, were on hand to greet shoppers but refused to talk to the Navajo Times.

In his statement to the press, Pratt stated that consumers are also victims when they are sold fake Native American art.

In referencing the abundance of evidence that's been collected, Martinez stated, "We can prove beyond a reasonable doubt in a court of law these individuals knew what they were doing and they knew this was jewelry not made by Native Americans."

"We are hoping this will send a message that this is important and they should watch out," he added.

Chavez, who said the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service signed a cooperative agreement with IACB, noted that the investigation is ongoing.

"As long as we are assigned this task, we will continue to investigate these obstructions of law that adversely affect Native American artisans and do our part in protecting the authenticity of their work," he stated.

If convicted, Ali, Manasra and Bowen each face up to five years in prison and a $250,000 fine, according to Martinez.