

Maricopa Village Christian School

BY JESSICA FRAME, PRINCIPAL OF MARICOPA

Gila River Indian Community is home to two tribes, the Pima and the Maricopa, and is located just south of Phoenix in Arizona. In the 1940's and 50's, there was a Seventh-Day Adventist School on the west end of the Reservation, in the same location as the present-day church. Many of the children from the village attended the Adventist school, and later went on to high school at Holbrook. The school had to close in the 60's due to the lack of funding.



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In 2001, the school was reopened with little more than prayers and dreams to operate it. There were four students, almost no school supplies, and the location was in a single wide trailer. But the somewhat bleak conditions didn't hinder Steve Morris and the members of the Maricopa Church from pressing on. They were determined to offer Christian education to the Native American children of Maricopa Village, an area saturated with people struggling to overcome alcoholism, drug addiction, and gang violence.

Unfortunately, health problems prevented Mr. Morris from returning the next year. But God proved that He had a plan for this little school to continue. He sent Mr. and Mrs. Gillen, a lovely couple from Kentucky who were well into their 70's when they made the brave move across the country to keep the school running until a more permanent teacher was able to take over. Consequently, I was that teacher.

My name is Jessica Frame. One Sunday morning while I was teaching in South Carolina back in 2002, I sent an email to the Arizona Conference inquiring about upcoming mission trips. I had hoped to incorporate some sort of mission work into my upcoming camping trip that I was going to be taking in Arizona during spring break. Apparently, God had a plan! I got a response from someone at the conference office that very same Sunday... but it wasn't quite the response that I had expected.

The email stated that there were no mission trips planned at that time, but that I sounded like the right person to come be the teacher at this school on a reservation. There were four students who had behavior problems in public school, very little supplies, possibly a \$500 a month stipend, and free housing in a trailer there. My job would be to recruit more students, start a Sabbath School program, and find funding. My initial response was something like "Yeah right"! I was adventurous and wanted badly to serve God, but a single girl in her mid-twenties leaving behind a secure job to move across the country onto

a reservation- alone- to work at a 'school' in a trailer kitchen just sounded like a crazy idea, especially to my family! But about a month later it hit me- without a doubt, I knew I had to go. Four months later I left for Arizona and have been at the school ever since. That was 8 years ago! J



The Growth of a School

In articles that I've written over the years to raise money for our donation-funded school, I've often exclaimed what a blessing it is to work at the school. Well, after 8 years, I STILL feel like it is an incredible privilege and blessing

to serve God in Maricopa Village! What a job- time and time again I see things happen that I KNOW only God could have done. And witnessing the growth of the children spiritually, academically, and behaviorally is a daily reminder of His transforming power!

The summer before I began teaching at the school, some local teens helped me fix up an old house on the church property so that we could move the school into a place that had a little more space than the trailer. It was in pretty bad shape, but it became a nice space. We



removed the appliances from the kitchen and put desks in there for the teenagers, and we used the adjoining living room space for the younger kids' desks. We were crowded, but at least there were more quiet areas for the kids to complete

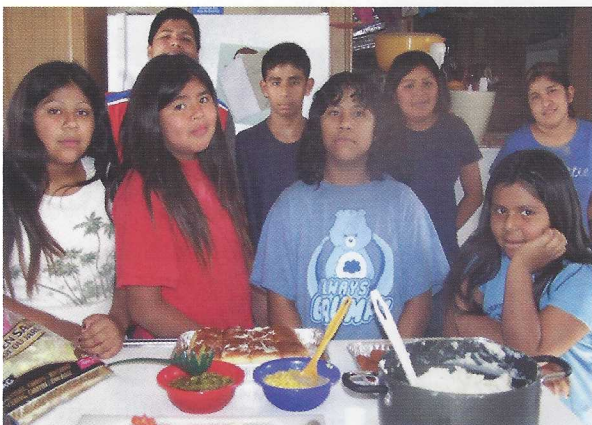


their work without the distractions of the main classroom. This building became our school for four years.

What a challenge it was those first few years at the school! We had ten kids spanning grades 1-8. We were all getting used to each other, and I was learning how to teach multi-grade day by day. Many of the kids were in our school because of behavioral or academic problems in public school, but our encouraging atmosphere and

individualized instruction helped the students overcome those problems. God knew just what they needed, and put them in a school where He could reach them without the distractions of a rowdy public school.

That first year we began a garden program. The Pima and Maricopa Tribes of the Gila River did a lot of farming traditionally, until the river was diverted into canals at the border of the reservation, robbing many of their ancestors of a way of life. We hoped that teaching the students how to garden would give them a connection to the traditions of their Maricopa tribe. We also felt that the kids would be more apt to enjoy eating the vegetables if they grew them, and we hoped



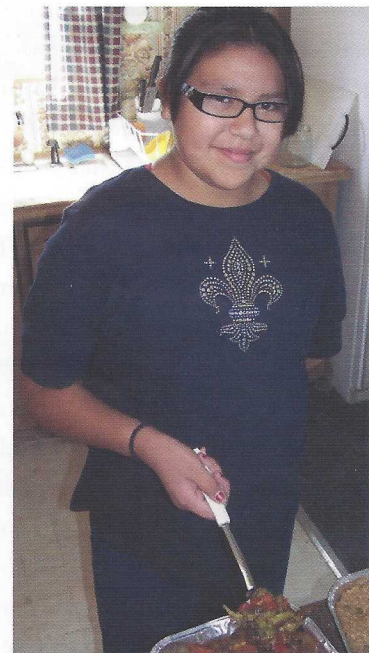
it would help cut down the food costs for our breakfast and lunch program. The garden program proved to be valuable. We've grown cabbage, Native onions, lettuce, carrots, radishes, beans, broccoli, cauliflower, and greens. And health, math, science, culture, and work ethic can be weaved into instruction.

It has been very interesting over the years to see the students' eating habits change. At first they were reluctant to eat the vegetarian meals that we provided. It was so new to them, and so different from the foods that they were in the habit of eating at home. In order to feed their large families, most parents stretch their food stamp dollars as much as possible by purchasing quantity over quality- foods such as bologna, hot dogs, and ramen noodles. So our students had not had the opportunity to develop a taste for fruits, vegetables, and foods with more natural ingredients. And the staple food for generations has been traditional Native American frybread, which costs pennies to make but has around a thousand calories before the addition of beans, hamburger meat, and cheese!



Early on, there could be a whole bowl of fruits for breakfast and some of the kids would eat nothing rather than a piece of fruit! But we kept sticking to the healthy diet, and began educating them on the necessity and benefits of healthy eating. With time, they got used to the foods and would even ask for second helpings of salad. Now, for most of the students who have been in our school for numerous years, healthy eating comes natural to them. It's so neat when we get the opportunity to eat out and they choose something healthy without having to prompt them to!

We praise God for the money to provide our students with healthy meals. It is a large expense for our little school, about \$2500 a year. There are many times that we barely have enough money to pull it off, especially in the months after Christmas when donations always dwindle. But God has never let us go without. We feel that our healthy food program is critical because if the students do not learn about and



develop these healthy habits at school, they are most likely not going to learn it from anywhere else and the percentage of diabetic Native Americans on this reservation is among the highest of any reservation in this country!

Acquiring operating costs for utilities, school van maintenance, supplies, and teacher salary is also a constant challenge. It costs nearly \$70,000 to operate the school each year. Most Adventist schools charge tuition and have that money to use towards expenses. The majority of the



God has also blessed us almost yearly with improvements to the school compound. The most profound one of these blessings was the upgrade into yet another building, a 30' X 60' double-wide manufactured classroom. The way God did it was a treasure to witness. The 'old house' school was sufficient for a time, but it was rapidly deteriorating and condemned because the foundation was crumbling. There were holes in the floor and walls through which mice and insects would frequent, and it was impossible to heat or cool it to a comfortable temperature due to the lack of insulation. But for four years, it was the best space the church property had. Every year a new structural challenge



people in this section of the reservation are unemployed, so if we charged tuition, we would be closing the door for most of the children. So each year we've managed to operate on faith that the money would come in from donations as we needed it. And each year God has provided enough to keep us going through donations from wonderful people who have a burden in their hearts to share the Gospel with the Native people.

would present itself and we would try to manage it, but it was a visit from the Tribal health inspector that finally made us realize that one way or another, we would have to find a different building or the school would possibly have to close.

The week after school was out in 2006, we found a building that had been used as a school portable. It was in pretty rough shape after sitting in a trailer yard for



years, but it had more character and potential than anything we had seen yet and the price was just \$21,000. Did God want us to have this building? Well, we prayed and moved forward in faith writing letters to businesses and seeking donations from previous donors. We felt that we would keep going until the door seemed to close. The week before school started, just 57 days after we began looking for a building, our 'new' school was delivered! Praise God! It took a year and a number of dedicated volunteers to get the building ready, but we were thrilled that the students and their parents now had a school building that they could be proud of.

The ways that God has progressively developed our school program and facilities are too numerous to mention in this short report! But as I reflect on all of the things that I have witnessed there, I believe that all of it was the means toward accomplishing one purpose: to make the school a light to the community and point them to an ever-present, active and loving God who always provides and is patient and able to transform lives!

In a community where gang-like behavior is rapidly becoming the popular norm in schools, our school is unlike any other in that our environment is positive and uplifting. Taking place inside our walls is the cultivation of a group of young people that are fully aware of the great controversy and that receive daily encouragement

to rise above Satan's tempting influence and to instead be like Jesus. They are constantly reminded that the world has an alarming shortage of people who do the right thing and who take time to make other people's lives better. All but one of our students has been attending our church/school for eight years! Nearly all of

them are well into their teen years now, and they have grown up learning about God. Has it made a difference?

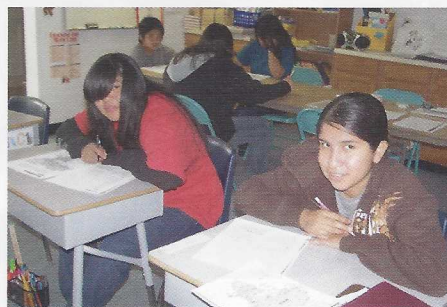
ABSOLUTELY! The beauty of it is that the school has not just made a difference in the lives of our ten students. Our students have influenced their



families through their behavior and actions, in many ways even unintentionally. The families have gotten to see the difference of a life with God in it! If their children weren't in a Christian school, they may have lived their entire life and never been intimately acquainted



with a Christian who could show them what God is like. There have been many encouraging changes in the families over the years. Until this year, not one of the children came from a Christian home. But over the past year, the father of two of our students began coming to church and recently got baptized- the very same man



that was a gang member and a drug dealer when I first moved to the reservation! And another family has gone from hiding when the church/school van pulls up to coming out to visit, offering to help

out at the school, and helping with fund raising and field trips. One of them just started Bible studies. There is a very good chance that if they didn't have relatives coming to our school, they may never have become open to and involved with spiritual activities.

The school has also made an impression on the community. Over the years, our students have had floats



with a health message in the annual parade—instead of passing out candy they passed out water and fruit. They have gone door

to door numerous times passing out Bible tracts and bread, pulled weeds in the yards of elderly people and in the housing projects, and they've picked up trash along the road. They've had yard sales and made crafts and baked goods and sold them up at the road to raise money for field trips. Each year they put on a Christmas play and then serve all of their family and friends a healthy vegetarian Christmas



dinner that they prepared themselves. They've visited the local nursing home several times sharing cards and crafts with the residents. Because of our students' outreach activities, the people in Maricopa Village have gotten to know what our Christian school is all about. People who don't even have kids come to the school for help such as food boxes, clothing needs, and even just to talk when they need encouragement. It is absolutely a blessing the way that God has used this little school to show Maricopa Village what He is like.

And it doesn't stop there. All of our activities, along with academic performance information, are reported to the Tribal Council each quarter. We participate in the same reporting process as all of the public schools on the reservation. Over the years, the school has gained recognition within the Tribal Government as being different. They started taking notice of us more and more when they realized that we are the only school on the reservation that consistently has blanks on the pages of the report where drugs, weapons, and violent

actions are reported. They have praised us for positive activities and the individualized academic help that has enabled our students to break from the norm and actually do well on the standardized tests. They also love the way that whenever possible, instructional units are culminated with some sort of real-life application such as a field trip, and they even give us the funds to enable us to take these educational trips. What has been very profound to me is that each time I go before the Governor and Council to give a report, they encourage me to keep giving the children instruction in spiritual



things. Some of them have actually said that it is so important for the kids to learn about God if they are going to overcome the struggles that they face, and to "keep doing what you're doing" because it's having a positive impact in

a way that most schools are struggling to. PRAISE GOD!

If you would like more information about our school, or to make a donation, please contact:

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PO Box 644, Laveen, AZ 85339

(480)272-5508

Or:

Arizona Conference of Seventh Day Adventists

PO Box 12340, Scottsdale, AZ 85267

(480)991-6777

Thanks for reading about our school!

Please keep us in your prayers.

