



Photos by Pat Shannahan/The Arizona Republic

Pastor Steve Morris is making a school out of a donated trailer with the help of his wife, Geneva. At right, Margie Bolduc (left) and Geneva Morris make food boxes for residents near their church in Laveen.



# Reservation school is reborn at local church

## Only public-school alternative

By Elizabeth Neuse  
The Arizona Republic

When the bell rings at the Maricopa Village Adventist Church in the Gila River Indian Community, at least six big brown eyes peek out the front window of a tired old house across the street.

In less than two weeks, the bell will signal the start of school for three of Travis Mercado's seven children and a chance to send them to a school that Mercado feels is safe for them.

His oldest will still go to Tolleeson High School. But his younger school-age children, ages 6, 7 and 8, told him they were scared to go back to public school because of the violence.

"Every day, they would come home saying people want to fight them," Mercado said. "I don't know why these kids are out of control; maybe it's because their parents don't discipline them."

Mercado is 43, a single parent and a Maricopa Indian who once attended the same school to which he's about to send the three children.

Adventist pastor Steve Morris and his wife, Geneva, created the educational option for Mercado and others on the reservation. The couple moved there in November but didn't plan on staying. They wanted to move to the Philippines to open a school, but soon they saw a greater need for a school literally in their own backyard.

Morris said people on the reservation don't have a lot of choices. Many of them are unemployed or disabled. The median household income on the reservation is about \$10,000 a



Native American children stand outside the school located at the Maricopa Village Seventh Day Adventist Church in the 1940s.

### FYI

For information about how to help or register students for the Maricopa Mission School, call Steve and Geneva Morris at (520) 430-5391.

year, so most families cannot afford to send their kids anywhere but one of the seven public schools in the two districts in the area.

"We want to give people a choice," he said. "We want them to know their kids are safe and happy."

As a substitute teacher, Morris has taught in many Valley schools, including Gila Crossing Community School and Estrella Mountain Elementary, where most Maricopa children attend. He said that they are not bad schools, but that the chaos and lack of discipline made it extremely difficult to teach.

Morris' school is not the first at the historic church at 80th Avenue and Baseline Road. In the late 1940s, a school for Native American children called Maricopa Mission School opened. When the school closed in 1965, the church began a 36-year decline.

"This place was literally a trash heap," Morris said.

He and his wife made the house livable on a non-existent budget and focused on building up the congregation.

"A lot of the native people are reluctant to get involved," he said.

The congregation grew slowly and now numbers more than 50.

With help from Morris' sons Kaleb and Elijah and Gary Groh, a homeless machinist who found a home and a family with the Morrises, the family is transforming a donated trailer behind its house into a schoolhouse.

Wells Fargo Bank donated 11 computers for the classroom, and Morris collected more than 2,500 books for the school library.

An orientation Sunday will give parents a chance to register their children for classes, which begin Aug. 20. Morris plans to charge \$100 per child a year, but scholarships are available. He will ask parents to donate four hours each month to the school.

Currently, Mercado's children are the only three students signed up. But Morris said it's OK if the school starts out small, because if it fills a need in the community, it will grow on its own.