

In plain sight



Vida Volkert/Independent

Cameron Reed Nez, 38, from Ganado, Arizona, walks through the America Heritage Plaza in Gallup April 8. Nez has lived homeless in Gallup for many years. He panhandles in town and sleeps in makeshift tents he builds with cardboard boxes and other material he salvages.

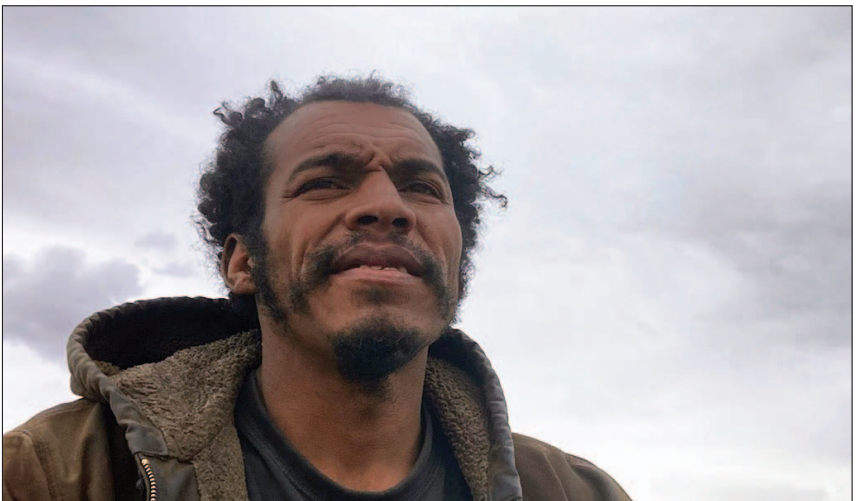
Alcohol and drug use rampant in Gallup

By Vida Volkert
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GALLUP — An underweight Cameron Reed Nez trudged through the Safeway parking lot in Gallup a recent afternoon with a meth pipe in his pocket. His face was weathered, so were his shaky hands. His clothes were dirty and hung loosely on his gaunt frame. He carried a plastic bag full of discarded containers he had picked up from the sidewalks, and walked around the McDonald's fast food chain on U.S. 491 looking for change on the ground. He needed \$10 to buy much less than a gram of street methamphetamine, he said, but it would be enough to get high for 6-8 hours — and "feel good again."

Nez stood by the McDonald's drive thru, staring at the drivers with an intense look in his eyes. A couple in an SUV gave him some change, but as soon as they saw his dirty hands and overgrown nails with dirt embedded inside (or perhaps noticed the pipe in his pocket), they rolled up their windows and left the parking lot as soon as they could.

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Cameron Reed Nez, 38, from Ganado, Arizona, has been homeless in Gallup for many years. He said he started drinking at 12 years old when he first visited Gallup and now smokes methamphetamine he can buy illegally in the streets. Local authorities report an increase of drugs in homeless camps around the city.



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An unidentified transient couple walks behind the Shell Gas Station on U.S. 491 in Gallup followed by another man in a bicycle April 18. The couple said they don't have any family or place to go because their relatives on the Navajo Nation died from COVID-19 and the rest of the family won't take them in because of their drug and alcohol addictions. They now sleep in makeshift camps outside the city.

Addiction in Gallup

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At age 38, Nez calls the streets, ditches, and hills of Gallup his home.

He spends the nights building fires to keep warm in makeshift camps he makes with cardboard, plastic bags, rags or whatever he can find in the dumpsters of this busy small Southwest town.

He used to sleep on a mattress he carried up to a hill on the north west side of Gallup, but he says he was "chased away by the cops." Now he has a camp south of Interstate 40, where he smokes meth or hangs out alone, or, sometimes, with other transients who share his addiction.

'Drunk Town USA' no more?

Gallup was known for many years as "Drunk Town USA." While local authorities have been trying to change that reputation, promoting Gallup as the "Indian Capital of the World," or the "Adventure Capital of New Mexico," the streets and surrounding hills continued to attract transients from around the region who come to Gallup to drink, and, in recent years, to get high with street opioids.

Gallup City Mayor Louie Bonaguidi, who has lived in Gallup all his life, said alcohol has always been a problem but the drugs are becoming prevalent.

"I don't think we are any different than anywhere else. They are all having problems with alcohol and drugs, and drugs seem more prevalent in the younger generations," Bonaguidi said Tuesday.

What has been increasing in recent years in Gallup, he said, is the number of homeless or transient camps in the outskirts, and the city's resources allocated to address that problem.

Bonaguidi said that during his time in office, the city has already spent more than \$100,000 to clean up those camps, contracting outside cleaners who are trained and equipped to deal with powerful drugs.

"We try to address the homeless situation as much as possible," Bonaguidi said. "We've had reports of homeless camps along the Rio Puerco, the hills, along the highway. It costs a lot of money to clean them up because if somebody sees a needle or any indication of powerful drugs, we have to bring a contract team. Just the smell of fentanyl could kill. Our police officers and fire fighters are all trained, but fentanyl is so powerful in its pure form that it would kill a person."

Bonaguidi added he would rather see the money put to better use.

"... Like potholes or streets, or the recreation department," said Bonaguidi. "We only have so much money, we only use it the best we can and we can't have people dying here."

Opioids

The Centers for Disease Control reports fentanyl is a synthetic opioid that is up to 80 times as potent as morphine and 100 times stronger than heroin.

Even in small doses, it can be deadly. "Over 150 people die every day from overdoses related to synthetic opioids like fentanyl," the CDC reports.

In fact, the drug is so powerful, the Centers for Disease Control developed a website with public information in case the drug is used as a "weapon of terrorism."

The CDC warns: Fentanyl (and other opioids) could possibly be used as an incapacitating agent to impair a person's ability to function. In October 2002, the Russian military reportedly used "a fentanyl derivative" against terrorists holding hostages in a Moscow theater; 127 of the hostages died.

Most recent cases of fentanyl-related overdose are linked to illegally-made fentanyl, which is distributed through illegal drug markets and can be found in liquid or powder. It is often added to other drugs because of its extreme potency, which makes drugs cheaper, more powerful, more addictive, and more dangerous.

The CDC reports powdered fentanyl is com-



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The April 8 photo shows a closeup of the worn out and weathered hand of Cameron Reed Nez, 38, from Ganado, Arizona. Nez has been grappling with drug addiction and homelessness for many years.

monly mixed with drugs like heroin, cocaine, and methamphetamine and made into pills that are made to resemble other prescription opioids.

In its liquid form, illegally-made fentanyl can be found in nasal sprays, eye drops, and dropped onto paper or small candies.

The top three

"Honestly, for McKinley County, what we see: alcohol is the number one addiction. Fentanyl is number two. Meth is actually three," said Maura Schanefelt, director of prevention and recovery at the Four Corners Detox Recovery Center in Gallup Tuesday. "No matter what the drug of choice is. No matter if it is sugar. The addiction is an issue, but I would say, 99 percent of people with substance use disorder have trauma. Behavioral mental health issues."

Schanefelt said that while addiction is "visible" in the person's behavior and appearance, what is not visible is the cause or root of the problem and that is why it's so difficult to address or treat. "What people are not able to see is trauma. Depression and anxiety disorders. And trauma can be the result of domestic violence, sexual assault, abuse, neglect. ..."

'They told me it was good'

Nez, who, at some point in his youth, lived in Ganado, Arizona, said he used to drink alcohol and had his first drink in Gallup at 12.

"I was small, a little kid," he told the Independent. "I was here, but I wanted to try it myself. I wanted to see how it is. They told me it was good."

Nez said he no longer drinks. He prefers to smoke meth, a synthetic stimulant that is addictive and may cause a temporary sense of heightened euphoria, alertness, and energy. This is because meth increases the amount of dopamine, a natural chemical, in the brain.

Repeated or regular meth use can cause some people to experience anxiety, paranoia, aggression, hallucinations, violent behavior, and mood disturbances.

When asked why he ended up in Gallup, he said he was looking for his mother.

"I was like 12 or 9 years old, hitchhiked to Gallup," he said. "I heard my mom was here."

When asked whether he found her and who is his mother, he replied: "Whitney. Whitney Houston

Four Corners Recovery and Detox Center

In 2023, Four Corners Detox Recovery Center in Gallup admitted 1,112 patients for treatment and cared for 2,279 outpatients. The organization served a total of 3,391 patients with substance abuse problems in 2023. Approximately 48% of the organization's clients typically go on to residential care after leaving detox. The detox center is located at 2105 Hasler Valley Road and is open Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Information:
505-413-3447

was my mother. She was a whore. I never knew my father. I was a naughty boy. A black baboon, a (expletive)."

A quick search online shows Cameron Reed Nez with matching date of birth spent some time in jail in Maricopa County, Arizona, in early 2019 for possession/use of a dangerous drug, shoplifting and trespassing.

He was then arrested and charged in Gallup in August 2019 for possessing a controlled substance and drug paraphernalia. The judge in Gallup Magistrate Court dismissed the case because he was found incompetent Sept. 30, 2019, according to court records.

A pattern of behavior

This has been the pattern of Cameron Reed Nez. In November 2017, he was arrested and charged with possession/use of drug paraphernalia and other misdemeanors. The cases were dismissed again by a Gallup Magistrate Court judge due to incompetence.

In May 2015, he was arrested and charged with criminal trespass and found not guilty in Gallup Magistrate Court because the witness or prosecutor failed to appear.