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Spirit of the '60s

by Rick Ruggles, The New Mexican
Jun 23, 2021



Morgan Timms/Taos News

Mixed-media artist Tandy Barnes, of Tyler, Texas, displays one of the headdresses she created Thursday (June 17) at the Rainbow Family's holding camp near Pot Creek. 'Anybody that feels disconnected from society or their family, it's a place where you can go home, and be accepted, loved, fed and grow spiritually,' she said.

CARSON NATIONAL FOREST - A throng of mostly out-of-state visitors nestled into a mountain valley west of Taos this week, erecting a city of tents and painted school buses and preparing for a celebration expected to draw thousands.

They prefer to use their clan names, such as Ramblin' Rose and Signs.

Signs said his real name is Paul Michael Glazier, "like the actor," although the actor spells his last name "Glaser."

He stood near a multicolored "Welcome Home!" sign at a turnoff from Forest Service Road 439, off the High Road to Taos. He said his job Thursday (June 17) was "front-gate security."

"Lovin' you! Welcome home! We're glad you're here, brother!" he yelled as a car turned in to the Rainbow Family camp.

The Rainbow Family of Living Light is a collection of peaceniks of all ages and people who wonder where in the world they fit in. Many members of the leaderless group say they have found an empathetic clan among these throwbacks to the late 1960s. Some have endured heartbreaking tragedies and are looking for healing and a chance to help others.

An estimated 200 members of the group began meeting this week for their "spring counsel" at their "holding camp" on Forest Road 439. An annual gathering of a few thousand - which comes after last year's event was rubbed out by the coronavirus pandemic - now follows. The official "seed camp" site has been announced, and they have made the transition to Forest Road 76 near Tres Ritos and Cerro Vista.

Their big meeting culminates in a long, silent Fourth of July prayer for peace followed by "oms" - the yoga and meditation mantra - and a children's parade.

The Rainbow Family members vow to clean up after themselves. They also carry propane tanks for fuel so they won't violate U.S. Forest Service bans on campfires, charcoal briquettes and firewood amid high temperatures and extreme drought that have driven up the risk of wildfire.

Several fires already have ignited in New Mexico forests this year, including two still burning in Santa Fe National Forest and one in Gila National Forest.

The Forest Service will develop a "resource protection plan" with the Rainbow Family to make sure they protect the water, observe fire restrictions, don't harm culturally significant sites, remove trash and generally care for the land.

"By and large, they have been very cooperative," said Forest Service spokeswoman Hilary Markin.

Markin said she worked for the Forest Service in Wisconsin when the Rainbow Family met there two years ago. "We've worked together pretty well with them," she said. The group assigns a cleanup crew after the gathering, she said, and they do well at restoring natural order to the area.

Glazier said he loves Rainbow Family gatherings, "when you see how beautiful it really turns out to be."

Some members of the family call the outside world "Babylon," he said, signifying corruption and decay.

He "took off at 16" and started traveling around the country, Glazier said. Now 42, he calls Houston his hometown, but lives in Oklahoma, where he is a professional tattoo artist.

Ramblin' Rose - who said her real last name is, in fact, Rose - grew up in Idaho, but now calls the road her home.

She said she "walked away from life" in 2015, after a cousin died of a drug overdose. She had intended to study for a job in drug rehabilitation, but decided to drop her two children off with their grandparents and wander, she said, which she has continued to do.

Rose attended her first Rainbow Family national gathering last year in Idaho and eventually got on a bus with fellow family member Cory James Richez Moore. At least part of the year, Richez Moore and his bus travel the country doing a form of detox outreach, suicide counseling and grief assistance, Rose and Richez Moore said.

Rose, 35, said she has food service experience and can staff the kitchen on the bus during and after the Rainbow Family meetings. She makes money by working in security or trash removal at recreational vehicle gatherings, such as one in Quartzsite, Ariz.

She also panhandles for money.

Richez Moore, who goes by "Pastor Useless" after he gave bad directions and some bus drivers got lost, said the Rainbow Family wants to educate and give back through conflict resolution and other initiatives. "We teach people how to cooperate," he said.

The first Rainbow Family gathering was in Colorado in 1972. The family is planning to return for a huge 50th-anniversary reunion next year.

New Mexico has hosted Rainbow Family meetings in the past. The group's records indicate an event took place in Gila National Forest in 1977. In 1995, 10,000 to 15,000 people gathered in the Tres Piedras area of Carson National Forest. Some locals protested that event. A Rainbow Family gathering of a similar size took place 12 years ago in the Santa Fe National Forest near Cuba.

Seven members of the group were arrested by local law enforcement officers that year, and dozens faced citations for offenses ranging from drug possession to not wearing seat belts, leaving dogs off leash, riding in the back of a pickup and leaving a fire unattended. The Forest Service reported 320 incidents during the weekslong gathering.

The U.S. Attorney's Office later agreed to reduce fines and drop the criminal charges.

Garrick Beck, a Santa Fe business owner and volunteer spokesman for the Rainbow Family at the time, said the citations were an excuse for the officers to search vehicles and "harass them."

Taos County Sheriff Jerry Hogrefe said he considers the Rainbow Family's gathering this year more a concern for the Forest Service than for his agency. He said he recently visited the group and looked around a bit.

He noted the Rainbow Family takes pride in not having any designated leadership.

Hogrefe said he has had "no significant encounters, no matters or problems" with the group. If he is called in by the Forest Service, he said, his agency will help. But, he said, "Don't anticipate that."

There was a summer camp feeling at the group's initial gathering spot this week. The majority of members were men. There were a few children and many dogs.

Occasionally, someone would pipe up, "Hot coffee!" or "Pizza!"

Late Thursday afternoon, Rio Spradlin, a 12-year-old New Mexico kid, pulled out a fiddle and played some folk and country tunes. Rio wore long hair and no shoes and received applause for the performance.

"Bravo!" said Richez Moore, clapping.

Richez Moore was as close to a leader as anyone. He calls Montana and Arizona his homes, but he spends more time in the bus, which he drives from state to state. He encourages people to write the names of a dead loved one on the side of the bus. It's a "mobile memorial wall," he said.

Many of those memorialized died of suicides and overdoses, but Richez Moore doesn't object to any deceased loved one's name being written on the bus as a form of catharsis.

He said his 13-year-old son and father died of suicide within a couple of weeks of each other two years ago, so his mission is "trying to inspire people to live." He wants to offer a street ministry and help street kids, he said.

"We're all depressed as humans," he said. The coronavirus pandemic worsened the problem, he added.

His bus is also a bit of an infirmary with air casts, a stretcher, herbal treatments, over-the-counter medicines, oxygen, pregnancy tests and other items.

New Mexico resident Gypsy James - her real name, she said - also provides a sort of sanctuary for addicts, people who have been abused and others in crisis. She said she is an herbalist in Tijeras.

James said as far as she's concerned, Rainbow Family members differ from hippies because the group isn't about free love and drugs. The aim of the family, she said, is to create a place ruled by peace.

Will Hooper contributed to this report.