

Ditch Patrol

Story by Phil Stake
Photos by Brian Leddy



TOP: Community Service Aides Timothy Hughtey, left, and Josh Woodard discuss the night's plans during a meeting at police headquarters prior to starting their shift on Saturday, Nov. 1. **ABOVE:** Two men, who gave the names of Larry and Darryl, are found in the field behind Ed Corley Dodge during a routine patrol. When asked their names, the men had trouble answering because of their high level of intoxication. **BELOW:** CSA Timothy Hughtey and Josh Woodard walk a field behind R & M Furniture, one of their routine patrols.

Community Service Aides comb ditches of Gallup to prevent exposure deaths

Temperatures will dip into the twenties tonight. Friday night saw single digits, but for the men and women who take to the mesas, fields and arroyos in and around Gallup, hypothermia isn't the only threat.

"They can become victims of rape, robbery, battery or murder," Gallup Police Detective Sgt. Matt Wright said earlier this week.

To those who seek safe haven, who face exposure to feed their addictions, these crimes are not uncommon. In fact, on Tuesday, Nov. 4 — just three days ago — a man holed up in what is known among transients as the Caboose Camp was beaten by people armed with golf clubs and sticks. As of Thursday, the man was still hospitalized in Albuquerque.

Whether the man was asleep or had passed out is unknown, but he was apparently unconscious. And once you've walked these ditches, where the

ground is often buried underneath dozens — more likely hundreds — of empty cardboard cases of malt liquor, beer cans, mouthwash bottles and expired cans of aerosol hair-spray, the tendency is to assume he had drunk himself to sleep; and to believe that whoever hurt him was after his stash of booze, or maybe the money in his pocket.

Ditch Patrol — touted among police as Operation Zero Exposure — started about four years ago, in response to the high number of deaths by hypothermia. McKinley County figures are not available, but last year 33 people throughout the state died from exposure, according to the 2007 annual report distributed by the Office of the Medical Investigator. Ditch Patrol for the 2008-2009 season started Oct. 20.

"We noticed our drunks were out in the flat areas — they hide out there," Wright said. "They hide in low-traffic

areas."

"Ditch patrol's full focus is finding the transients that are out in the weather," Gallup Police Detective Lt. Rick White said Wednesday. "Their main focus is finding them and getting them into a safe environment."

Independent photographer Brian Leddy and I walked the ditches with two Community Service Aides during the overnight shift last Saturday, Nov. 1. The cold had not yet reached its seasonal peak, but I bundled in layers, and by the end of the trek my boots had filled with sharp Yucca needles and my skin felt like frozen rubber. We started in a field between South Second Street and New Mexico Route 602. CSAs Josh Woodard and Tim Hughtey said it's a known haven, and one that is frequently patrolled.

Beams from our four flashlights bounced around the dark field for 20 minutes before we

left. We found remnants of occupation — blankets, T-shirts and the tell-tale litter of a drinking habit — but no people.

"The weird thing about ditch patrol is we notice when something is out of place because we walk it every night," Hughtey said as we left the field.

After an all-available-units call to which Hughtey and Woodard responded, finding three drunk young men whom they transported to NCI for detox, the search resumed in a field behind Grace Bible Church on Boulder Road. We trekked for 10 minutes in the dark before finding Patrick Parker and Judy Francisco sleeping on a bare mattress at the peak of the mesa. A thin, cotton blanket is all that covered them. Surrounding the mattress were windblown remnants of a desperate drunk — mouthwash and hairspray containers — but Francisco said she drank "two four-racks" of Camo High-Gravity that night. So someone else must have left the rest of the litter; that, or she lied.

Either way, their movements were slow and clumsy, and each stepped with a pronounced stagger as Hughtey and Woodard led them to the cruiser for transport to NCI, where they would receive warmer shelter for the night.

Around 1:30 a.m. we entered the wild expanse behind Safeway and KFC on the north side of Gallup, through which 10-foot deep arroyos course like veins. The cold wind bit my skin as I stepped out of the car and powered-on my flashlight. We combed the field southward first, peeking over the ledge of the arroyo and through the brush. Our steps were hasty as we followed a fence line and almost stepped past two men huddled quietly against the fence in a patch of coal-black



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-Lt. Rick White

night.

"Darrell, is that you?" Woodard asked, apparently recognizing one of the men, whose headphones now clearly erupted with the modern-rock sounds of System of a Down.

The man never responded to Woodard and never turned down the music, even after he took off the headphones. Brian and I, when asking his name, received only Navajo ramblings in response. Even those were

not immediate.

The other man said his name was Larry but the ID in his pocket said Willard. The picture on the ID was of a different man. Hughtey said he probably "rolled" someone and stole it. Hughtey and Woodard walked the men to their cruiser and turned on the heat. Then we all resumed the search where we left off. There was still a lot of field to cover.

After about 20 minutes, Woodard found Maurice Begaye on a feather mattress, covered by a relatively thick comforter. Begaye said he hadn't brought the blanket, but he knew it was there. He appeared drunk, but he was able to walk and talk and he was happy to be going to NCI for protection from the elements. He said he just needed to stay in Gallup one night, that his family, who live in Lukachukai, was coming to get him Sunday. They were supposed to have been there that afternoon. Later he said he was working construction in Gallup during the week and had only drunk a few beers that night with one of his coworkers.

This, it seems, was just another night in the ditch.



Patrick Parker and Judy Francisco are found in a field between Grace Bible Church and Nizhoni sleeping on a mattress. The shivering couple were happy to be taken to NCI.