

Breaking barriers to help Native Americans get the gift of life

For many American Indians and Alaska Natives, living on the Indian reservation provides a sense of pride, independence, and the ability to maintain cultural and social traditions important to their heritage.

Life on the Indian reservation can also mean high rates of poverty, lack of access to food, transportation, communication, and health care. Complex medical procedures like an organ transplant can seem unattainable.

Mayo Clinic in Arizona is working to change that.

A new patient outreach program is helping to connect American Indians and Alaska Natives with the lifesaving transplants they need. Marty Velasco Hames takes us to the Navajo reservation where one man says the program helped save his life.

Video	Audio
	Miles off the paved roads, in the rugged Northern Arizona desert near the banks of the Colorado River sits the small Native American community of Leupp. The very first Navajo chapter on the Navajo Indian reservation. Robert Monroe, his wife Jackie and their children are one of a handful of families born and raised on this land. Like many others who call this community home, they live with little means, far below the poverty line.
Jackie Johnson, Robert's wife	"But you know money is tight. It is a limited income. And now we have the two grandkids that we have to provide for."
	(Track) Then, five years ago, the family got some devastating news. Robert was diagnosed with kidney disease, that would require dialysis three times a week. The closest center about an hour away.
Robert Monroe, Patient	(Sot) 5:25 "It wasn't easy, a lot of times we hitchhiked, we hitchhiked to dialysis."
	(Track) After almost five years, dialysis was not enough. Doctors told Robert he needed a kidney transplant to survive.
	(Track) That's when Silena Thomas stepped in. Silena also grew up on the Navajo reservation facing similar struggles. She now works as a patient navigator in the

	transplant center at Mayo Clinic in Arizona. She works to remove cultural and language barriers, and so Native Americans can get the lifesaving transplants they need.
Silena Thomas, Patient Navigator Transplant Center Mayo Clinic	"You come here and all you see are white faces, and you know that is scary, and that's intimidating and plus you don't understand what they're saying and then they try to ask you questions, and that can be very intimidating."
	Silena helped Robert and Jackie secure transportation, lodging, insurance, and other details for the transplant, but it was the cultural connection with Silena the family valued the most.
	"She was like, part of us at Mayo Clinic, because she knew Navajo. We would speak and laugh with her in Navajo, and we felt comfortable because she was like a sister."
	"I know that my mom would be very proud. Just being able to do what I did for her and my grandma. Be that bridge, especially if there is a language barrier, just being able to be present for some of these patients."
	Robert's kidney transplant was a success. Fully recovered, he's back home on the land he loves, enjoying time with his family, and looking forward to a brighter future with gratitude for the donor who gave him the gift of life.
	"My own words would be that the person that donated has a bigger heart than I do. Thank you for making me special again."
	For the Mayo Clinic News Network, I'm Marty Velasco Hames.