

Celebrating the MVA Partnership with Indigenous Arts by L.D. Wakeley

Your Mesa Verde Association (MVA) is honored to fund many park projects that celebrate the Indigenous arts, history, and people of the Four Corners Region. As the park's 2024 busy season approaches, we'd like to share some of the remarkable successes partly or wholly funded by the Association in the recent past.

In summer 2023, the Association funded lectures and demonstrations by Navajo weaver and historian Mr. Venancio Aragon as part of the Four Corners Lecture Series (4CLS), which is organized by MVA staff each year. As described by Aragon, his weaving "combines the ancient techniques of my ancestors" with his polychromatic color palette of "over 250 colors of naturally and synthetically dyed wool yarns." He views his loom as "a powerful connection to culture, identity, and history." His historical research has led him to recreate complex weaving patterns that otherwise might be lost. His unique style and complex tapestries are "a living record of the cultural survival of my people and a testament to the current vitality of my heritage." His presentations at the Chapin Mesa Museum last summer attracted enthusiastic gatherings of international visitors, park staff, and MVA board members, who were privileged to view him at work and to see a few of his remarkable tapestries.

Before he became a full-time artist, writer, and scholar, Aragon served as an interpretive ranger in Mesa Verde and other southwestern parks. More recently, he was a Native Artist Fellow at the School for Advanced Research in Santa Fe. He currently serves as an Instructor of Navajo Textile Arts at the Dine College, Shiprock. His work has been shown from New York to Florida to Arizona and beyond, and he has a tapestry in the permanent collection of the Heard Museum, Phoenix. You can learn more about his research and weaving in an episode of *iColores!* produced by New Mexico Public Broadcasting (on YouTube), from his website (venancioaragon.com), and from his many articles in professional publications. Aragon will lecture about his research and weaving at Fort Lewis College in September in the 2024 4CLS.

Ms. T.J. Atsye, a member of the Laguna Pueblo and a long-term consultant to the park and to MVA, assisted Mr. Aragon in answering visitor questions during his 2023 presentations at Mesa Verde. Atsye, an accomplished storyteller and a former park ranger, contributes to critical park communication projects such as the podcast series, *Mesa Verde Voices*; and narrates the popular Mesa Top Loop audio tour for the park, both partly funded by MVA. Through her work as a Sales Associate in MVA stores, she deepens the story of the Ancestral and modern Pueblo people for many hundreds of park visitors each year. Come to the Mesa Verde Visitor Center on a Sunday and you may get to meet her! She has contributed to stories of Pueblo history and culture in regional publications such as *High Country News*, *Outside* magazine, and many others. She earned accolades for her appearance in the CBS Saturday Morning program on Mesa Verde's status as an International Dark Sky Park. Atsye was part of the 5-year dark-sky undertaking that began with MVA funding and leadership. It evolved into the ranger-led team that successfully concluded its efforts when Mesa Verde became the 100th site officially recognized for its dark night skies. As Atsye said in the CBS program, the skies "give us a place to come home to. Skies are magic! Skies are powerful. This is forever, this is universal." (The CBS program is at https://www.cbs.com/shows/video/mQC_GW5DZV6VqOI5_jeMZJcvC5jeACQE/).

Following up on the popular success of the Indigenous Artists in the Park in 2023, YOUR Mesa Verde Association will continue to fund presentations by Indigenous artists in 2024, to include pottery demonstrations, dancing, and musical arts. Many thanks to Mr. Aragon and Ms. Atsye who are two reasons our funding partnerships are so successful. Their leadership and creativity, along with participation by many other Indigenous leaders and with MVA support, assure a quality future for Indigenous contributions to a vibrant and multicultural Mesa Verde National Park.

Article and photo by Dr. L.D. Wakeley, MVA Board Member



Venancio Aragon, left, showing completed tapestries and work underway during his presentation at Mesa Verde National Park, summer 2023. Assisting him is T.J. Atsye, long-time park consultant and MVA team member.