"Thank you, Mr. Rowe"

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Commonwealth agent and 'lifer' make unlikely alliance as they join in the spirit of giving.

By Darlene Friedman

One warm October day, the usual stillness surrounding Rahway State Prison is shattered as inmates—locked behind the melancholy, grey stone walls—look down upon the sights and sounds of a true media blitz. Reporters, notebooks in hand, scurry to get their stories, while photographers freeze their subjects into history. Prisoners, biceps rippling through grey T-shirts, hoist plastic trash bags bulging with toys from a long red trailer to a 20-foot U-haul truck. And 17 Native American Indians, adults and children—in handwoven shawls, buckskin suits, moccasins and feather headdresses—graciously submit to the multitude of inquiries.

Attention shifts as prison guards escort into the yard a slight man in blue jeans, dark jacket embossed with the words "Ayuda Toy Drive," and handcuffs. As the Indian children run to greet him, he looks down at his cuffed hands and says in a quiet, wistful voice, "I wish I could get these off."

For the past 6 years, prisoners at Rahway, under the direction of Rick J. Rowe, a 41-year-old serving a life sentence for kidnapping, have been soliciting and collecting toys for needy children. Calling the program Ayuda—"help" in Spanish—Rowe proudly dubs it the most successful toy drive in existence, with more than 300,000 toys collected for the 1984 holiday season.

This year, because of an enduring fascination with the plight of American Indians, Rowe invited a group of Indians to make the 1,500-mile journey from their homes in Miami, Oklahoma, to Rahway, New Jersey.

"I had three reasons for asking the Indians here," explains Rowe. "First, I wanted to meet some real Indians. Second, I've read that they're pretty bad off down there, so I wanted to send them back with a lot of toys. And third, I wanted to get publicity for Ayuda."

While Rowe clearly shines as the star of this show, Ayuda and the Indians' visit are the fruits of a joint effort between Rowe and several other hard working, dedicated volunteers—including Commonwealth agent Roger Knox, president of Commonwealth Title–Monmouth Agency in Freehold, New Jersey.

"My association with Rick Rowe and Ayuda has been a fascinating and successful one," reflects Knox, a lank man with a shock of brown hair and an easy laugh. "It began several years ago when I visited Rahway with a friend, George Beecroft, who was writing a story for the *Asbury Park Press*. At the time, Rick was collecting toys—most of them used. The prisoners repaired and wrapped the toys before they were distributed by guards and other volunteers to needy area children.

"I was incredibly impressed with what Rick was doing. I said to George, who, like myself, is a member of the Elks, 'I think Ayuda is something we should get involved with. Let's take this back to the Elks.'"

The Manasquan Elks, of which Knox was exalted ruler (president) at the time, was the first fraternal organization to get behind Ayuda. In the 5 years since the Elks' initial involvement, Ayuda has mushroomed into an operation handling thousands of dollars worth of donations and distributing hundreds of thousands of toys a year. Toys are donated by leading manufacturers and retailers including Herman's World of Sporting Goods, Wallace Berrie Corporation and Mattel Toy Company.

"Prisoners aren't allowed to handle money, so a board of trustees was created to oversee the program, and I was appointed co-chairman of the board," explains Knox. "Most of the other trustees are media people; that's who Rick knows best.

"I told the other trustees right from the beginning, 'Let's keep our noses out of this,' because Rick runs Ayuda as well as I run my own business. He doesn't need any interference from us.

"What Rick does is super, just great. He works 12 hours a day soliciting donations from toy companies and staging events like the Indian visit. Some people say he has an ulterior motive—that he wants to get as much favorable publicity as possible so he can get out of prison. And, if that's the case, I can't say I blame him. But, I like to think the best of people. I like to think he's doing it to make up for his wrongs and to occupy his time with something constructive.

"I do believe Rick is redeeming him-

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From behind prison walls, a spirit of giving

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self, and I base this on what others say about him. The warden, the guards, even the officer who arrested him—they think the world of Rick."

Rick Rowe, self-taught public relations practitioner, is no stranger to the limelight. Newspaper and magazine articles and television documentaries have paid tribute to the man who first gained notoriety in the mid-70s for another brainchild, "Scared Straight," a program that brings juvenile offenders inside Rahway, where they get an excruciating crash course on the realities of prison life. The highly-touted program continues today without much involvement from Rowe.

"I just couldn't take it anymore," he says. "So many of these kids have such terror at home—poverty, incest—it gave me nightmares to hear about it."

Now, Rowe concentrates on Ayuda and on his other great love, reading—a skill he mastered behind prison walls. "My favorite subject is Indians—I've read more than 200 books about them," Rowe states, not attempting to mask his obvious enthusiasm. "I am fascinated by the lives they lead. Their way of life was like a dream to me... living in nature with their beautiful traditions and customs. My feelings for them are special, I guess because they're the underdog... I can relate to that."

"When Rick first approached Sally Whitecrow, a representative of the Seneca-Cayuga Tribal Business Committee, she was very, very skeptical," recalls Knox. "Indians and their problems don't seem to interest many people, so when she realized how serious Rick was she was more than glad to help," says Knox. "First thing we did was contact the Miami Elks, who do a lot of work with the Indians. Harold Jones, exalted ruler, and his wife, Barbara, volunteered to fly up—at their own expense—and drive back the toy-filled truck."

Upon their arrival, the Indians were welcomed into the homes of six local families—three of whose members represent Commonwealth: Roger Knox, Knox's partner, Joan Dames, and Dames' daughter, Micaela, who conducts title searches for the Freehold office.

The visitors spent two days sightseeing, with the grand finale being a quick trip to the most famous city in the world—the Big Apple.

"New York totally floored the Indians," Knox laughs. "One remarked, 'We sold them New York and just look what they did with it!'"

On the final day of their stay, the Oklahoma Indians set out for Rahway Prison to meet Rick Rowe and accept some 70,000 toys. There, they showed their heart-felt gratitude, presenting Rowe with tokens of their appreciation. Among the gifts was 7-year-old Willie Harjo's drawing of New York—complete with a Statue of Liberty in full, feather headdress, signed by each of the Indian children and inscribed, "Thank you, Mr. Rowe."

Worthwhile, warm and memorable is how everyone involved described the three-day storybook visit.

For Rick Rowe, in the 12th year of a life-plus-25-year sentence, meeting the Indians was a fantasy come true—born from years of reading and dreaming.

"Rick has talked with Sally Whitecrow several times since her return to Oklahoma. She has repeated how overwhelmed they all were to be treated with such warmth and respect.

"Rick has decided to make this a yearly event. He told me he's already planning next year's trip—with 45 Indians from Oklahoma, South Dakota, and Canada, visiting for 9 days. I said, 'Whoa, Rick, let's not go overboard here.'

"But, you know," Knox muses, "the other day I heard a Johnny Cash recording, 'Ira Hayes'—the tragic story of an Indian who died in the gutter after becoming a war hero and losing himself in the white man's world.

"I started thinking," continues Knox enthusiastically. "Johnny's always taken a real interest in convicts... And he does this great song about an Indian... Maybe we can persuade him to join us at the prison next year..."

Native Americans in 1984: Striving and Hopeful

What is life like for Indians in contemporary American society? Not easy, according to Pattie Harjo, a Seneca-Cayuga Indian who journeyed to Rahway with her son, Willie.

Harjo is a professional conservator. That is, she is trained in the methods of repairing and preserving artifacts—everything from dinosaur bones to fine art paintings.

Obviously intelligent and motivated, Harjo wanted to earn a formal degree in teaching, but she abandoned her goal after education funds through the Bureau of Indian Affairs were cut. Instead, she wound up at the University of Colorado's museum—practicing and perfecting her craft and teaching others the finer points of conserving artifacts.

In 1976, she was awarded a grant to study the Indian collections at several East Coast museums. Her travels took her to museums in Boston, Philadelphia, New York, and the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.

Harjo returned to Oklahoma and her family after being offered a conservator's position at a proposed museum. Her hopes were dashed, however, when the venture fizzled due to lack of public support.

Currently, Harjo earns minimum wage as a concession waitress in order to support her young son and ailing mother. And while she is not bitter, Harjo describes a frustration she says is common to many Indians, for whom opportunities and resources are limited. In Oklahoma, home to 33 tribes, unemployment runs as high as 25 percent among Indians.

"In Colorado, I taught at the university. When I returned home to my family in Oklahoma, I found I couldn't even teach at a junior college or in the public schools. I lack credibility because I have no formal degree.

"So I'm a concession waitress... and lucky to have a job," maintains Harjo. "And if I hadn't been at the right place at the right time and had friends there, I wouldn't be working at all. I was previously employed cooking meals for $6 a day. Who works for $6 a day?"

According to Harjo, many other Indians work at one thing out of necessity but would rather be earning a living with the cultural skills and expertise they possess.

But today, Harjo optimistically looks to a new age, the growth of a new pride, a new awareness. Indians are learning how to use their leverage—to better educate and equip themselves.

Education has unlocked doors for the family of another of the visitors, Charlie Dawes, second chief of the Ottawa tribe. His daughter, Charla, soon will be awarded a Ph.D. in education. His son is a practicing ophthalmologist. Observes Harjo: "Sure, the Dawes family is unusual, but these kinds of accomplishments give us *all* hope for what is possible."