

# 'I used to stay here in the dark': Utility workers from across the country light up the Navajo Reservation

**Shondiin Silversmith, Arizona Republic** Published 10:33 a.m. MT May 22, 2019 | Updated 4:02 p.m. MT May 22, 2019

OAK SPRINGS — At the sound of a click, Ella and Herman Lynch's house was connected to electricity after 19 years.

"Yes!" Ella shouted after the utility meter was connected outside her home. She eagerly turned on a light, powered for the first time by power lines instead of a generator or propane.

"Ahhh, look at that," she said happily, pointing at the ceiling light. "We can walk around in here all night long."

"We did it!" she said to her son, Thurman, with a hug and a huge smile as she started to cry. Her husband, Herman, walked up beside her and pulled her into a tight embrace.

"I'm crying because we had no lights, I'm so happy that we have our lights," she said wiping the tears from her face as she looked at the utility crew. "Thank you so much."

Workers with the Navajo Tribal Utility Authority and the Salt River Project worked for over eight hours to connect the home to power in Oak Springs, Arizona, on the Navajo Reservation. They installed three power poles, connecting the house to existing power lines over 600 feet away.

The work was done as part of Light Up Navajo, a pilot project launched by tribal utility authority and the American Public Power Association, with a goal to bring electricity to 300 homes over six weeks.

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## Light Up the Navajo Nation

The project was the brainchild of Navajo Tribal Utility Authority's general manager Walter Haase. In 2017, he traveled across the country giving presentations about the authority and its efforts to connect Navajo families to the grid. Haase is the immediate past chairman of the American Public Power Association, which advises more than 2,000 public utilities on electricity policy, technology, trends, training and operations.

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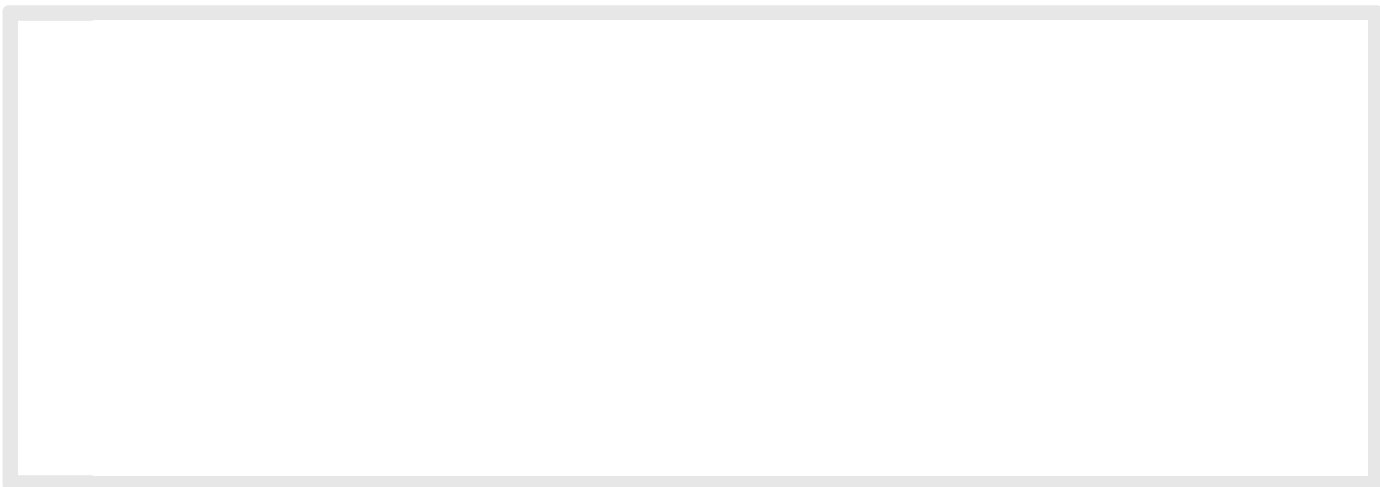


After his presentations, people often said they had no idea families were still living without power and then asking what could be done.

“Those questions led to a bigger conversation with APPA,” said Deenise Becenti, government and public affairs manager with Navajo Tribal Utility Authority.

The Light Up Navajo project was partially inspired by an American Public Power Association mutual aid project that sends public power crews around the country to restore electricity when extreme weather hits. The concept of Light Up Navajo is simple: provide electricity to families without it. It builds on the idea of mutual aid, bringing partnerships beyond singular events to an ongoing initiative.

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“It’s the first time a project of this sort has ever been done here in the U.S.,” Becenti said.

Every week, visiting utility crews from across the U.S. were paired with Navajo Tribal Utility Authority crews and sent to various locations across the Navajo Reservation. It took the tribal utility authority more than a year to prepare for the project, working with families from 63 different Chapter Houses in 70 communities. There are 110 chapter houses across the Navajo Reservation acting similarly to a local government for communities.

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“It’s not only about giving a family electricity for the first time,” Haase said. “It’s about showing people care about this community.”

This project is truly impacting lives. Haase said, because the crews are not just building these power lines for one family, they’re building it for future generations.

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On the Navajo Reservation, approximately 15,000 families do not have electricity, according to the tribal utility authority. Assuming there are about four people per home, that's about 60,000 people without electricity.

Becenti said the crews from seven districts across the Navajo Reservation normally hook up 480 homes a year. The effort from Light Up Navajo will push them well over their yearly average.

The Lynches and other selected families have been on a waiting list to get connected and were "shovel ready," meaning all the required paperwork was done and fees covered. Becenti said families can wait anywhere from 5 to 10 years before they can be connected.

## Living without power

The Lynch home is located right off Indian Route 12 in Oak Springs, about 35 miles west of Gallup, New Mexico. In 2001, the family moved from Hunters Point to a home on the family land, which had been used for planting.

The land has been passed down through generations of Ella's family. It has never had running water or electricity.

"I used to stay here in the dark," Ella said. The steps in front of her trailer have solar-powered lights taped to the railing for them to see where to step.



**Mattie Roam, Herman Lynch's sister, and Alfred Yazzie make fry bread, May 13, 2019, at the home of Ella and Herman Lynch in Oak Springs, on the Navajo Reservation. (Photo: Mark Henle/The Republic)**

They'd use propane gas lights, flashlights or battery-powered tap lights when needed. There was a stock of batteries to load the radio with. When they finally got a generator, they were able to use it for about five hours a night, just for necessities. They could watch TV for a bit and plug in a light here and there. Each night before bed, Herman would walk outside and turn the generator off.

The sun-faded green generator still sits about 50 feet from the house near a small shack. It takes six gallons of gas to fill. A long yellowish extension cord plugged into it stretches across the dirt into the house, where it's connected to a power strip in the living room. The family has gone through four generators since 2001.

No electricity meant the trailer did not have a heating or cooling system. The family installed a wood stove in their living room and used wood and coal to heat the house. During the summer, they left the front door and windows open to let cool air in or set up a fan by the front door.

The trailer does have a fridge, but it wasn't filled with food. Ella kept non-perishable items in there, like vinegar, lard and some utensils. In the freezer, she had a small suitcase and some plastic bags. They would only buy a single day's worth of food at a time, keeping it cool using an ice-packed cooler.

"We don't buy big bags of groceries and we don't stock them up," Ella said. Before the lights came on, most of the food would go to waste without a fridge.

Ella and Herman's son, Thurman, 30, still lives in Hunters Point, about six miles away. He remembers growing up in the trailer without electricity. He often did

His current home has electricity, and when his parents needed a reliable power source, they visited. The trip has been made more often since his father got a pacemaker over a year ago and they need electricity to monitor it.

"I've been living out here without lights for so long," Ella said.

It's had an impact on her life in several ways, like limiting the amount of food they buy, and her kids don't visit often because there is no electricity. They even had to disconnect their cable because it didn't have a constant power source.

## Getting connected

Herman said they reached out to the Navajo Tribal Utility Authority to get electricity throughout the years because the poles were so close, only about an eighth of a mile away. But cost estimates were too high when they first moved in, around \$22,000.

"We didn't have that kind of money," Herman said. So, they waited, hoping the price would go down. When they went in for a re-estimate over a decade later, it went down to \$12,000.

In the past three years, the average cost to get a family connected to electricity is \$40,000, Becenti said. Families only pay for a portion of the true cost to connect their home to the grid. That \$40,000 includes labor, materials, any distance and terrain complications, and right of way and environmental clearances.



Tommy Skye (bottom) of the Navajo Tribal Utility Authority and Jake Haines of the Salt River Project work on a pole May 13, 2019, at the home of Ella and Herman Lynch in Oak Springs, on the Navajo Reservation. (Photo: Mark Henle/The Republic)

If families come to the tribal utility authority as part of a chapter house project, the chapter house covers most costs and families pay for the price of the pole connecting their home. If not, Becenti said the utility works with the family on the cost, and they're allowed to make payments.

The tribal utility authority also gives \$1,500 credit to all families getting connected for the first time, Becenti said.

With help from their local chapter house in Oak Springs, Ella said they were able to get funds for their estimated cost and start working with the Navajo Tribal Utility Authority to get connected.

Ella was contacted to be part of the Light Up Navajo project weeks ago, and to make sure she got connected, they made a down payment on the \$1,600 metering equipment pole on May 6.

## Over 200 homes now on the grid

Volunteers with the Light Up Navajo project connected 228 homes to the grid as of May 18. The project has 125 volunteers from 26 utility companies across 12 states and hopes to wrap up by Saturday.

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many Navajo families to the grid over his 15 years. It never fails to make him happy

"I like it when I see the person for the first time getting power," he said. "It's great to me whenever I see that. It makes my job worth doing for my people."

All four linemen working from SRP had never visited the Navajo Reservation before the Light Up Navajo project.

SRP foreman Chris Stinski said he volunteered to go because he wanted to bring a sense of community to different parts of the state.

"We do emergency work at home," Stinski said. "It's kind of a sense of community to get out there and help these people get back in power when they're out of power. We figured let's take this sense of community and take it into a different part of town."

About 30 SRP employees participated in the Light Up Navajo project, according to a press release from SRP. They set 249 poles, strung 26 miles of overhead wire and donated 3,250 man-hours.

Stinski was the one who clicked in the meter at the Lynchs' home. He said when he heard they had been waiting 19 years for power, it was a humbling moment.



**Ella Lynch serves lunch to the Navajo Tribal Utility Authority and Salt River Project crews May 13, 2019, at her home in Oak Springs, on the Navajo Reservation. (Photo: Mark Henle/The Republic)**

"Most people in America kind of just take it for granted," Stinski added.

The Lynch family said they are grateful for the work that Navajo Tribal Utility Authority and SRP did for them as part of the project.

"It makes their life a lot easier," Thurman Lynch said of his parents getting connected. "I'm glad that they finally got this. This really brings joy to them."

Ella said she looks forward to buying a freezer to stock up on meat now that she doesn't have to buy it on a day-to-day basis anymore.

As for her husband, he said he's going to put away his generator and the extension cord.

*Reporter Shondiin Silversmith covers Indigenous people and communities in Arizona. Reach her at [ssilversmi@arizonarepublic.com](mailto:ssilversmi@arizonarepublic.com) (<mailto:ssilversmi@arizonarepublic.com>), and follow her Twitter, [@DiinSilversmith](https://twitter.com/DiinSilversmith) (<https://twitter.com/DiinSilversmith>).*

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