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Design team: Lynette Pollari and Stephen Thompson have worked together on designs for the Navajo Preparatory School in Farmington, N.M., for the past two years.

Firm draws on tradition for Navajos

Scottsdale architects design renovations at tribal school

BY JAMES A. AHLERS

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The Navajo nation is forging its future with the help of a Scottsdale architecture firm. The century-old Navajo Preparatory School in Farmington, N.M., breaks ground today on a \$40 million campus expansion designed by Scottsdale's Thompson Pollari Studio.

The Navajo school is the only college preparatory academy in the country run by American Indians. The students are primarily Navajo, but Hopi, Apache, Zuni and Pueblo youth also attend. About half are from Arizona. Graduates include Dr. Taylor McKenzie, the first Navajo surgeon and vice president of the Navajo nation Fred Begay, the first Navajo nuclear physicist. Recent graduates are enrolled at such universities as Stanford and Georgetown.

The United Methodist Church founded the school in 1891, and its oldest building was built in 1912. Time has taken its toll. "These dorms are literally falling apart" said Marla Yazzie, a Navajo Prep senior from Fort Defiance, Ariz., on the Navajo reservation. "We've had instances where we've had no heat in the winter for a day"

The school considers renovation of the campus essential to its own future and that of the Navajo. The school's motto, translated from the Navajo, is "Tomorrow's leaders."

The architects behind Thompson Pollari Studio, Stephen Thompson and Lynette Po1lari, share that vision. Thompson and Pollari share a deep respect for cultural diversity and a commitment to preserving it. In the three years they've been on the Navajo Prep project, the architects have held countless meetings with students and faculty to find out how they could integrate Navajo culture into the design.

Among the students' desires was that the dormitories main entrances face east toward the rising sun, as the doors of traditional Navajo homes do. Thompson and Pollari met these and other requests.

All buildings will be arranged to respect the "circle of

life" at the heart of the 82-acre campus. The expansion also includes plans for a hogan, a ritual Navajo gathering place. A Navajo medicine man blessed the ground for the hogan last May. Yazzie, who is also student body president, took part in the student design committee that met with Thompson and Pollari. "I was able to work with the architects in designing not only the dorms, but a future for the school," she said. "The school has been here for 100 years and I'm totally involved in seeing it be here for another 100 years."

The school is looking to increase enrollment from 200 to 300 over the next five years, said Betty Ojaye, director of campus development. This requires modern facilities. Phase I of the expansion includes renovating four dormitories - using the original structures - and rearranging the athletic fields. Phase II will overhaul the historic buildings and athletic complex, and build a new student center.

Subsequent phases include fine arts and performing arts centers. The Navajo Nation has approved \$4.5 million for Phase I, enough to cover the dorms. Ojaye said she expects the BIA to approve another \$6.4 million for Phase II. The school still must raise tens of millions more, and is kicking off a fund-raising drive at today's groundbreaking ceremony.

School officials, Thompson and Pollari, Farmington city officials and the builder, New Mexico-based Jaynes Corp., will attend the ceremony. Native dancers will perform and a medicine man will bless the land. The students and the architects are excited to see the building finally begin after years of planning.

"You get one project in life that's your labor of love," Pollari said, "and this is it."

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