

2020



OUTSTANDING

*Women*

of the *Mesilla Valley*

THE LAS CRUCES  
**Bulletin**

# Celebrating Women

## OF THE MESILLA VALLEY

### THE LAS CRUCES Bulletin

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**W**hen the Las Cruces Bulletin was founded, 50 years ago this month, listed as president was Doris (Boyd) Donnelly. When the Las Cruces Bulletin was owned by FIG Publications, from 2003-2012, listed as president was Jacqueline (Jaki) McCollum.

With two women presidents, and many, many women employees over the years, there's no doubt as to the impact women have had on our organization. During the nine years I've worked at the Bulletin, our newspaper has always had a majority of women on our staff.

And women have certainly made an impact on our Mesilla Valley, which is one reason we decided to launch Outstanding Women of the Mesilla Valley, to recognize the specific women making that impact.

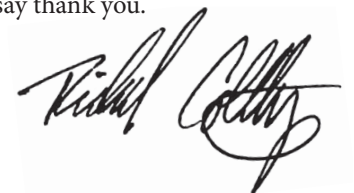
Last fall, I met a high school junior, Sofia Herrera, who goes to Arrowhead Park Early College High School.

In describing her aspirations to become an OBGYN, she said, "I want to help women. I mean after all, they give us life."

Her point might be obvious, but still underestimated.

The women recognized on the following pages represent a wide variety of influence on our community. They were each nominated by peers, friends or family for the roles they play in making life better for all of us.

We say thank you.



**Richard Coltharp**  
Publisher  
Las Cruces Bulletin

## Wendy Lara

### Taking the anguish out of dental visits

**N**ext time you go to the movies, you might run into Wendy Lara, and her mother, Marsha Adkinson. Lara describes Mom as her "favorite person. She makes me a better dentist, because she's afraid." Lara understood long ago that, if she can ease the fears of her mother, who's easily uncomfortable in the dentist chair, she can learn to make other patients more relaxed as well.

Dr. Wendy Lara is a dentist with the nonprofit Ben Archer Health Center and has done a great deal of volunteer work in Las Cruces and other communities, providing free dental care.

She was the 2011 La Clinica de Familia employee of the year. She performs, for example, challenge tooth extractions, including wisdom teeth, for patients who cannot afford an oral surgeon, and does this not only for Ben Archer, but also for University Family Dental in Las Cruces.

According to one of her patients, Lara also treats many special needs patients that others are uncomfortable treating. She treats all her patients and Ben Archer staff with kindness and courtesy and goes a long way to dispel clients' fears about dental work.

#### AT A GLANCE

**What roles do you play as a woman?**  
Daughter, sister to one, granddaughter, aunt of two, niece, cousin

**What year were you first in the Mesilla Valley?**  
2004

**What's your favorite chile dish in the Mesilla Valley?**  
Red enchiladas from Si Señor Express

**What is your job?**  
General dentist

**What is your hobby?**  
Movies with mom, birds, cleaning house

**What inspires you?**  
My mom, Marsha Adkinson, and her unlimited kindness and patience



**Wendy Lara**

# Misty Arruda

## Entrepreneur has drive to succeed

Many local heroes go unnoticed but here's a great opportunity to recognize a woman who selflessly takes on the safety of our community," said Denise Flores, who nominated Misty Arruda, owner of Mesilla Driving Academy, as an Outstanding Woman of the Mesilla Valley.

Arruda has been in the driver's safety industry for 15 years and was named top training specialist for drivers in Hawaii in 2014. She moved back to New Mexico and brought her passion with her and in 2015 opened Mesilla Driving Academy in our city.

"Misty has demonstrated her commitment to driver's safety by sharing her time and talents with our youth and local drivers in ways that benefit not only Las Cruces but also the surrounding cities in this great valley," Flores said.

Arruda's skills do not end with her work. Misty has demonstrated exceptional personal commitment to civic endeavors outside of her profession and is amazingly giving. According to Flores, Arruda always has a smile on her face, pours her heart into teaching, financially supports all the local high school sports teams, sponsors and volunteers with the kids at

Community Action Agency and supports other local business owners by shopping local first.

"Her heart is in this community," Flores said. "She loves the people and works hard for them. Therefore, I believe Misty has demonstrated her abilities as a woman, individual and leader of this community. She is the type of woman we want influencing our beautiful city and making wonderful changes in this great valley."

Dawn Post described Arruda as "an outstanding teacher and mentor for her students. Their safety and knowledge of the state driving laws ensure her students learn and practice safe driving attitudes," Post said.

"She was born in Las Cruces, and although has lived elsewhere in her journeys of life, Las Cruces has always been 'where she's from.'"

Gracious in accepting the honor, Arruda cited a higher source for her success.

"I have always been a hard worker, self-employed in one venture or another, since I was 18," Arruda said. "But, my priority has been to deal honestly in all things and to work hard towards my God. That can be hard in business. However, keeping His standards and His thinking first in my life benefits not only me but everyone around me."



Misty Arruda

## AT A GLANCE

### What roles do you play as a woman?

Wife, mother of two, sister of two, aunt, niece, cousin, granddaughter

### What year were you first in the Mesilla Valley?

Born here but left and grew up in Georgia. Returned in 2014.

### What's your favorite chile dish in the Mesilla Valley?

Chile rellenos and gorditos

### What is your job?

Owner-operator, Mesilla Valley Driving Academy

### What is your hobby?

Snorkeling, reading, sightseeing – especially to national parks

### Is there a quote that inspires you?

"Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as though you were working for the Lord and not for people." – Colossians 3:23

# Looking for a gift?

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**Nova Castillo**

# Nova Castillo

## AT A GLANCE

**What roles do you play as a woman?**  
Wife, daughter, mother of two, sister of three, aunt, cousin, granddaughter, niece.

**What year were you first in the Mesilla Valley?** 1990

**What's your favorite chile dish in the Mesilla Valley?**  
Green enchiladas

**What is your job?**  
Owner,  
Super Nova Studio

**What is your hobby?**  
Painting, crochet

**What inspires or motivates you?**  
My children

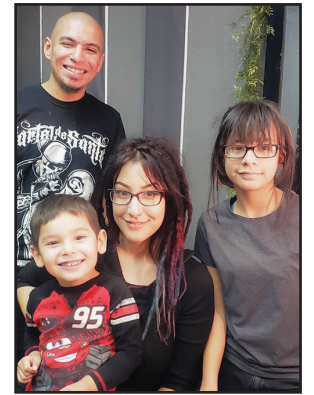


## Blending art, work, family

**A** young business owner of Super Nova Studio hair salon, Nova Castillo received nominations from two people, Janice Venable and Brenda Martinez.

“Nova is such a hard-working and determined woman, she sets the bar for the rest of us,” Venable said. “Her heart is so true and she cares so much about everyone she meets. She is an outstanding member of our community.”

Martinez described Castillo this way: “She is an amazing artist and wonderful person all around. Nova should be recognized as an outstanding woman of Mesilla Valley because she is just that, outstanding! I have never been disappointed with any of her work. She is an extremely hard-working woman and a wonderful friend. I’m so proud of her for starting her own business as she has worked very hard for it.”



# Candace Avalos

## Making an impact

**C**andace Avalos empowers women and children through football. She was commissioner for 10 years of the NERF football league in Las Cruces, making football safer by bringing the heads-up tackling program to New Mexico. As tough as that sounds, though, Avalos is more proud of her alter-ego: Gigi.

That’s what her two grandchildren, one 8 and one 3, call her.

“Because I’m a pretty tall woman, and because I play offensive line in football, people assume I’m mean,” Avalos said. “But I think I have a big heart, and I try do what my grandfather, Tony Duran, taught me: Do the right thing when no one’s looking.”

Avalos is fondly known as Mama, and is known as a role model for improving self-esteem with ladies who may have been in negative situations.

She was also a cheer coach for the 2018 state championship team at Oñate High School. In much of what she does, Candace channels her mom, Martha Duran.

“She’s the strongest woman I know,” Duran said. “She raised four kids on her own.”

Another inspiration for Avalos was her aunt, Mabel Duran, who passed away in mid-December.

“She had Down syndrome, and she was my best friend. She was such a kind and loving person,” Avalos said.

## AT A GLANCE

**What roles do you play as a woman?**  
Daughter, mother of four, sister of two, granddaughter, grandmother of two, aunt, niece, cousin, wife

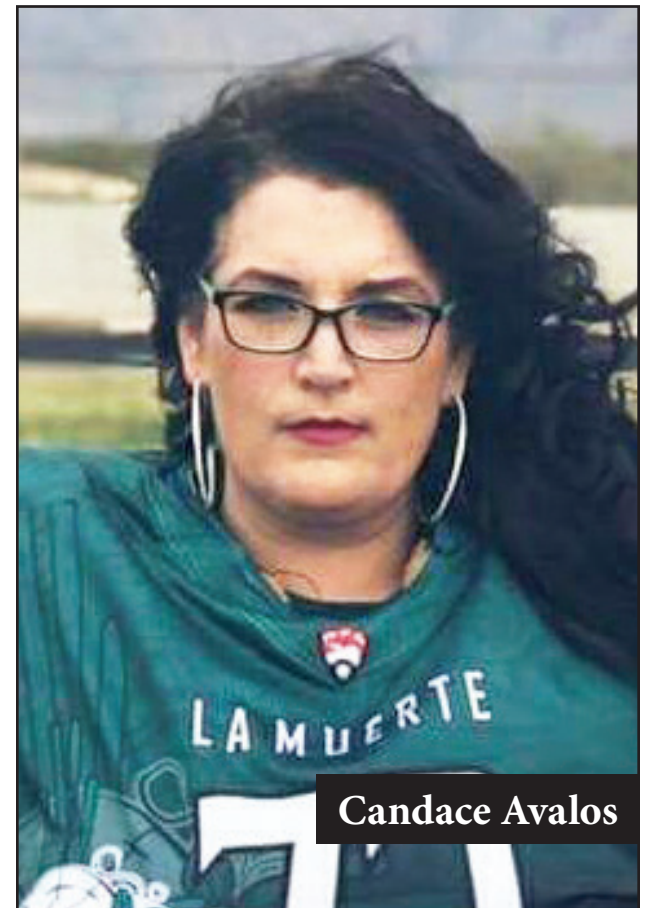
**What year were you first in the Mesilla Valley?**  
I was born here.

**What's your favorite chile dish in the Mesilla Valley?**  
Homemade green enchiladas and tacos

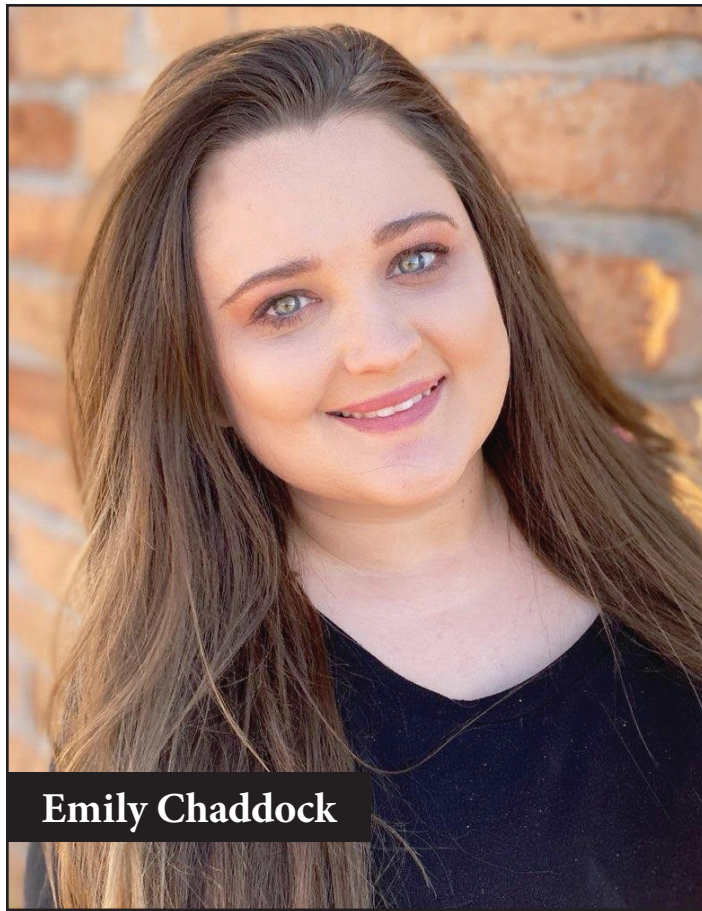
**What is your job?**  
I’ve had the luxury to stay home and raise my children and foster many others

**What is your hobby?**  
Crafts, music, cooking, football

**What inspires you?**  
My husband and children



**Candace Avalos**



Emily Chaddock

# Emily Chaddock

## AT A GLANCE

**What roles do you play as a woman?**

Wife, daughter, sister to one, granddaughter, niece, cousin

**What year were you first in the Mesilla Valley?**

1995

**What's your favorite chile dish in the Mesilla Valley?**

Green chile chicken enchiladas with an egg over medium, from Miguel's

**What is your job?**

Southwest Regional Development Manager at the Alzheimer's Association

**What is your hobby?**

Travel, teaching dance, reading, volunteering

**Is there a quote that inspires you?**

"Just keep swimming."  
— Dory, from Finding Nemo

## Devoting time, energy to Alzheimer's Association

Emily Chaddock is the Southwest Regional Community Development Manager for the Alzheimer's Foundation, a position she recently took over. Previously, she was community engagement manager, in charge of building and creating events, fundraisers, sponsorships and donors for two of the biggest events of the year, Longest Day and The Walk to End Alzheimer's.

With the help of the community she was able to raise up to \$100,000 for the association. Money raised goes back into the community to provide programs, services, and assistance to families and those diagnosed with the disease. Many of her events were featured in various media outlets, including radio and television interviews, newspaper articles and more. Emily is a well connected person in the community and strives to build and improve the reach of individuals looking to give back.

In her spare time, she likes to volunteer for other organizations.

# Alexis Ramirez

## Helping families through incredibly tough times

Alexis Ramirez is the Programs Volunteer Case Manager at the Alzheimer's Association in Las Cruces. She works long hours and helps many families in their time of need.

She is often the person who is sitting with families as they cry and explains the toll the disease has taken on their loved ones.

According to her colleague at the Alzheimer's Association, Emily Chaddock, Ramirez is super passionate about what she does and hopes to one day end this horrible disease.



## AT A GLANCE

**What roles do you play as a woman?**

Daughter, sister of one, granddaughter, niece, cousin

**What year were you first in the Mesilla Valley?**

20-plus years ago

**What's your favorite chile dish in the Mesilla Valley?**

Green Enchiladas with chicken

**What is your job?**

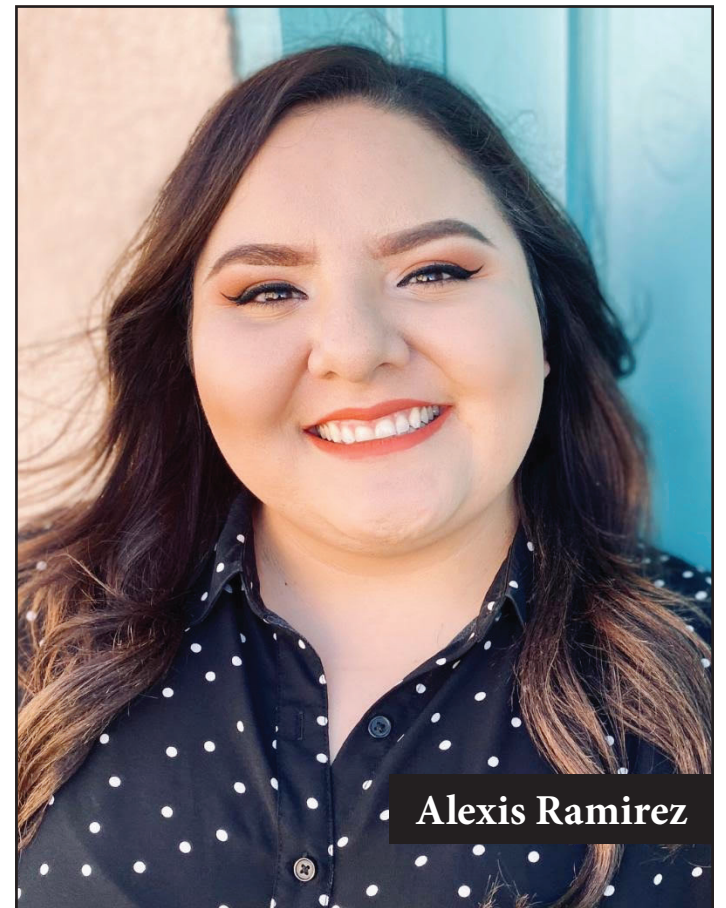
Programs Volunteer Case Manager, Alzheimer's Association NM Chapter

**What are your hobbies?**

Hanging out with friends and family, traveling and being around my dogs

**What quote motivates or inspires you?**

"To live is the rarest thing in the world. Most people just exist." – Oscar Wilde



Alexis Ramirez

# Denise Chávez

## Tending to the temple of the printed word

BY RICHARD COLTHARP

Las Cruces Bulletin

A gaggle of women went to a bookstore in Juarez, not a bookstore, a library.” This was Denise Chávez, describing a recent Saturday.

“There it was, in a poverty-stricken area near the wall, garbage everywhere. But there, in a little yellow house on a hill, was this library. We had a Christmas party and distributed books to kids.”

The looks on their faces, their joy, was the same thing Chávez experienced, growing up in Las Cruces’ Mesquite District.

“I was tiptoeing from the children’s book section to the adult section in the old Branigan Library (now the Branigan Cultural Center at 501 N. Main St.)” Chávez said, remembering a childhood book memory. “There was a wonderful lady named Helen Caffey who worked in the library, and she let me Check out ‘Gone With the Wind.’ My mother was appalled. My mother hid it from me all summer. But I would find it and read it. Then she would hide it. And my sister would find it and lock herself in the bathroom and read it. This went on all summer. I know there must have been heavy fines on

that book.”

And thus began Chávez’s lifelong love affair with books.

For most of her adult life, she’s been an author and a self-proclaimed “book steward.”

She operates the Casa Camino Real book center at 314 S. Tornillo St., five

blocks from where she was born. She also originated the Border Book Festival, which promotes not only books, but multiculturalism. The book center itself represents multiculturalism. It’s in the heart of Las Cruces, with deep Hispanic roots. But it’s also a house, that from 1918 to 1983, was the home to Lula Grimes, whose

family were among the first African-Americans to settle in Las Cruces.

“I’m a defender, a book steward,” she said. “And a steward of what’s behind the book: love, humanity, people. I love that humanity that books give us. The more books you read, the more humane you become.”

When she was a child, growing up in Las Cruces, there were not that many books in Spanish.

So that’s a big part of the mission of Casa Camino Real, to provide books that fit people’s culture, and also to introduce others to new cultures, especially for young people.

“I love the humanity that books give us. The more books you read, the more humane you become.”



Denise Chávez

### AT A GLANCE

**What roles do you play as a woman?**

Wife, sister of two, aunt, cousin, granddaughter, niece

**What’s your favorite chile dish in the Mesilla Valley?**

My own chile relleños, with chile from Lujan Farms

**What year were you first in the Mesilla Valley?**

Born and raised here

**What is your job?**

Book steward

**What inspires you?**

Books

Chávez married later in life and had no children of her own, but has raised and cared for many people.

“Not everyone has the grace and blessing of children,” Chávez said. “I’ve had a different role in life. I have nourished a lot of students, and I did my diapers with my elderly father with Alzheimer’s for 15 years. I’ve been fortunate to shepherd many people, including my father.

“We’re a community cultural resource center,” she said. “When teachers need

information, when people need to know how to make biscochos ... whatever.

“Books can change a life,” she said. She’s seen it many, many times.

“When you see the expression of child living in a tent or under a tarp, and they get a book, you understand,” she said. “And when you see an old man whose Bible was thrown in the garbage by ICE, you understand.

“Books are sacred, and this is my temple.”

# Yolanda "Yoli" R. Diaz

## AT A GLANCE

**What roles do you play as a woman?**

Daughter, mother of three sons, sister of five, granddaughter, grandmother of seven, aunt, niece, cousin, wife

**What year were you first in the Mesilla Valley?**

Born here and lived here all my life

**What's your favorite chile dish in the Mesilla Valley?**

Enchiladas, both red and green

**What is your job?**

Leader of a volunteer-powered nonprofit that supports the day-to-day nonmedical necessities of local cancer patients in active treatment, with the goal for improved health and quality of life

**What are your hobbies?**

Time with family, watching grandkids' sports, networking and building relationships in our community

**What inspires you?**

The philosophy of "Do it anyway," in Kent Keith's "Paradoxical Commandments," later practiced and popularized by Mother Teresa. I feel in my soul helping cancer patients is what I need to do

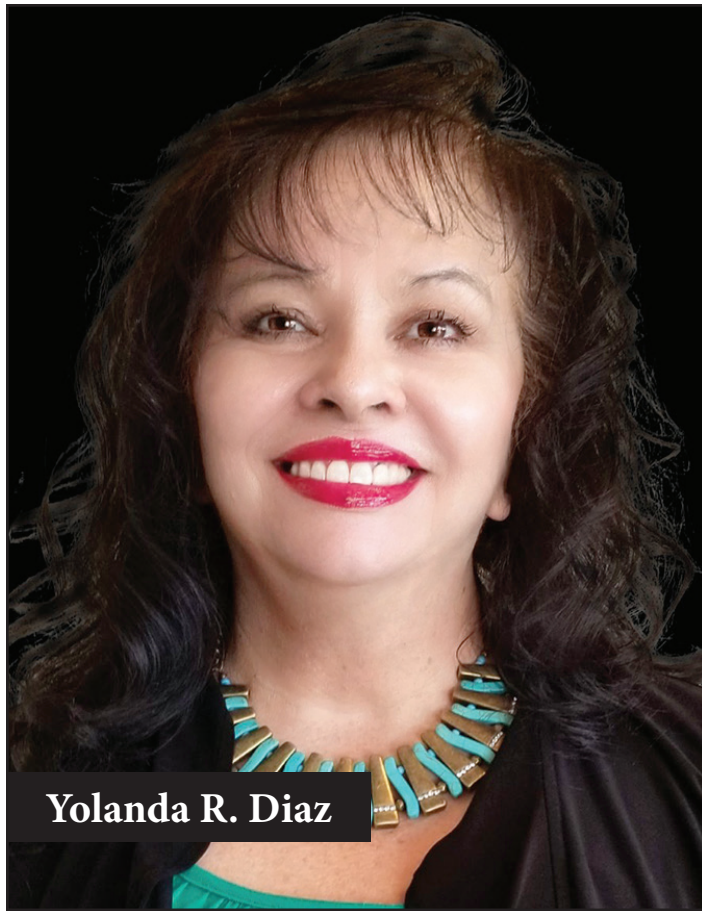
## Cancer inspires birth of CARE

**F**or over 10 years Yoli Diaz has volunteered full time for different causes and organizations. She took her focus on founding an organization that would help local cancer patients. Thus, in 2013, CARE – Cancer Aid Resource & Education, Inc. was established.

"When I chose to help local cancer patients, it was because I understood the devastation and hardship of a cancer diagnosis and what follows," she said. "I knew because I was affected personally when my son and then my father were diagnosed. There are many focus areas to cancer: research, awareness, prevention, early detection, community outreach, education, treatment, advocacy, caregiving, resources, support groups, survival and financial assistance. I chose to help in one of the most difficult areas to address, but one of the most needed areas to address: financial assistance."

Why? Cancer brings devastation to individuals and families, yet the suffering goes far beyond diagnosis and treatment.

CARE is about helping local people today, people recently diagnosed with any type of cancer and in treatment to cure, shrink or stop the progression of their cancer.



Yolanda R. Diaz

# Jennie Moore

## Nurse has a passion for compassion

**J**ennie Moore is a nurse, currently working in home health care. But her passion for caring goes beyond the work day. In one particular case, Moore's care has made all the difference.

A few years ago, when Michelle Gonzales had a new baby, her older daughter was 5.

"This was a total change for my 5-year-old and, of course, myself," Gonzales said. "At that time, I was so stressed out, things weren't going well and seemed as though the struggle trying to get through each day was getting worse."

That's when Moore, the "auntie," stepped in to help with care of her niece. "She is now 11, in sixth grade and volleyball, with straight A's," Gonzales said.

Jennie, a full-time nurse, works long hours day after day and takes care of her elderly mother.

"Jennie has done an amazing job with my daughter," Gonzales said. "She does her best to anything to include herself with school or sports, and is always going out of her way for my daughter. I'm a very lucky person to have someone like her in my life. She's the best auntie my girls can have."

## AT A GLANCE

**What roles do you play as a woman?**

Daughter, aunt, sister of one, granddaughter, niece, cousin

**What year were you first in the Mesilla Valley?**

Born and raised here, went to Oñate High School

**What's your favorite chile dish in the Mesilla Valley?**

Green enchiladas at Napolito's

**What is your job?**

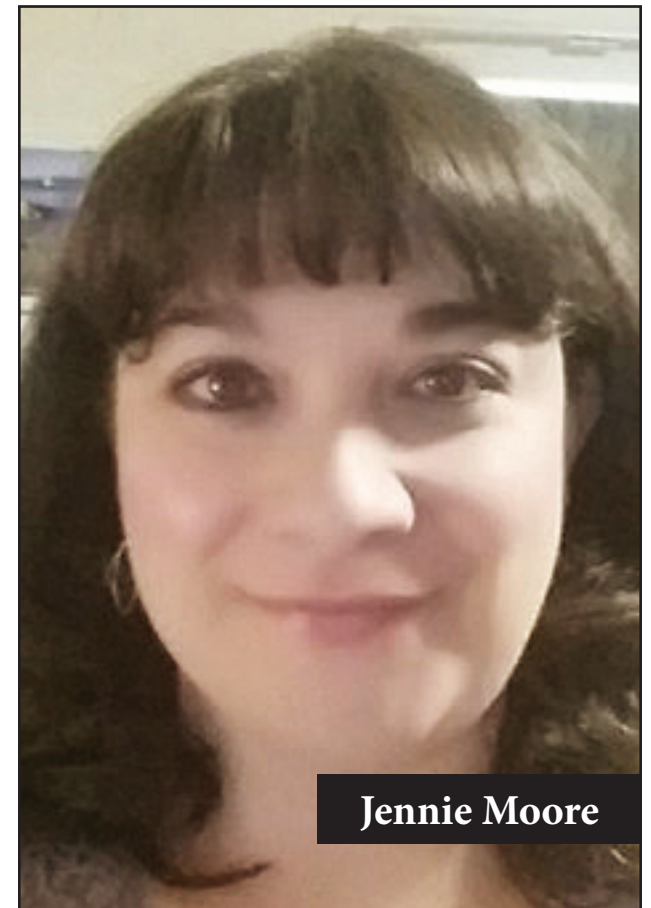
Home health nurse

**What are your hobbies?**

Reading, hiking, swimming, bicycling

**What inspires you?**

I was raised by a lot of strong women. My grandmother was a nurse as well, and I'm inspired by seeing people help each other



Jennie Moore

# Grace Duran

## Leaving a legal legacy in Las Cruces

The name Grace Duran in Doña Ana County is synonymous with legal service.

From the time she helped establish Southern New Mexico Legal Services in 1977 to the present, she has been a positive influence in the legal community.

She is a pioneer, becoming the first Child Support Hearing Officer and Special Commissioner for Domestic Violence for the Third

Judicial District, and becoming the first woman elected to serve as a District Judge in this county.

She was instrumental in establishing the court's mediation program, which is still going strong today, and requiring divorced couples with children to attend parenting education and develop parenting plans to assist them in co-parenting their children.

While in private practice, she assisted countless people in establishing and protecting their legal rights. She systematically decided early in her career

that she would provide pro bono legal services every year for at least five different families.

Duran was re-elected District Judge and returned to the Bench in 2018. She is currently presiding over all child abuse and neglect cases in Doña Ana County as well as managing part of the domestic relations docket.

On a personal level, she and her husband, Udell Vigil, have two sons: Justin and Cameron.

She moved to Las Cruces in May 1977, after being recruited to help establish Southern New Mexico Legal Services, where she worked until 1979.

But she didn't have to travel far to come to Las Cruces.

"I come from a pioneer family and grew up in the Tularosa Basin," Duran said. "I am the seventh of eight children, and was the first to obtain a college degree in my immediate family."

*"I come from a pioneer family and grew up in the Tularosa Basin"*



Grace Duran

### AT A GLANCE

**What roles do you play as a woman?**

Wife, mother of two, sister of seven, aunt, cousin

**What year were you first in the Mesilla Valley?**

May 1977

**What's your favorite chile dish in the Mesilla Valley?**

Enchiladas (both red and green)

**What is your job?**

District Judge  
– Third Judicial District Court

**What is your hobby?**

Gardening

**Is there a quote that inspires you?**

"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."  
— Phillipians 4:13



Udell, Justin, & Cameron Vigil  
join the 3rd Judicial District Court in congratulating  
**The Honorable Grace B. Duran,**  
An Outstanding Woman of the Mesilla Valley.



# Elizabeth Kuchler

## Unsung hero finds many ways to put her nursing skills to use

**M**any women in the Mesilla Valley “stand out.” Several outshine others and are widely involved in public services.

Then there are women who shine brightly in the community but live in the shadows of others. These women are considered the workers, the backbone of what needs to get done, and seldom look to be rewarded. Connie DeBlieck knows one of these individuals, and it inspired DeBlieck to nominate her as one of the Outstanding Women of the Mesilla Valley.

That individual is Dr. Elizabeth Kuchler. Born and raised in El Paso, Kuchler was familiar with Las Cruces and Mesilla, especially from visits to La Posta and Stahmann Farms. When it came time for college, Kuchler decided to come to Las Cruces full time, as a student, at New Mexico State University. She didn’t foresee she would never leave Las Cruces, and one day return to work at the university where she earned her nursing degree.

Years before she came to NMSU as an employee, Kuchler worked for the Public Health Department for many years, serving the rural community as a nurse practitioner. Kuchler was a leader at the Las Cruces Department of Health and one

of the first Hepatitis C treatment providers across southern New Mexico, working with Dr. Sanjeev Arora and his initial ECHO Hepatitis C telemedicine clinic in New Mexico and as it expanded across the world.

At NMSU’s School of Nursing, Kuchler educates registered nurses to become doctorally prepared family nurse practitioners. Her goal is to produce future rural healthcare providers for New Mexico.

Kuchler spends countless hours working with students helping them to succeed in family nurse practitioner courses. During the school year, she provides adolescent healthcare services with the Ben Archer school-based health clinics. Acknowledging the shortage and need for healthcare providers in the community, she provides healthcare as a nurse practitioner.

During the past four years in her “spare time,” Kuchler has been the primary caregiver for her 90-year-old mother, Barbara Kuchler. She may not be recognized within the community as a headliner, DeBlieck said, but Kuchler is recognized as an outstanding leader with her clients, students and colleagues.



Elizabeth Kuchler

### AT A GLANCE

**What roles do you play as a woman?**

Daughter, mother of one, grandmother to two

**What year were you first in the Mesilla Valley?**

Came to NMSU in 1978 and never left

**What’s your favorite chile dish in the Mesilla Valley?**

Anything with chile, both red or green, especially red chile con carne or enchiladas

**What are your jobs?**

Doctor of Nursing/  
Family Nurse Practitioner,

**jobs continued...**

Assistant Professor of Nursing at New Mexico State University, School Based Health Clinic at Las Cruces High School, MountainView Regional Medical Center Internal Medicine

**What are your hobbies?**

Watching my grandsons at home and when they play sports, reading, walking

**Is there a quote that inspires you?**

“The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in service to others.”  
— Mahatma Gandhi

# Congratulations Elizabeth Kuchler!

From your colleagues at the College of Health and Social Services

**BE BOLD.** Shape the Future.  
College of Health and Social Services



# Heather Pollard

## Belief in Las Cruces inspires life of community involvement

**A**s a Mesilla Valley Hospice board member, Heather Pollard had a vision of a thrift store that would financially benefit Mesilla Valley Hospice. That vision came to fruition in 2015 with the opening of The Emporium – a thrift store on Water Street that sells vintage and antique furnishings, jewelry and linens. It has generated significant income to benefit our local hospice and has grown to the point that they are expanding their store.

This is just the most recent chapter of Pollard's work in Las Cruces. Her vocation has been to serve as executive director for nonprofit organizations. For example, she was the first director of the Doña Ana Arts



**Heather Pollard**

Council in 1982, and served in that role for 22 years. She was also a main driver of the Downtown MainStreet project.

Her avocation has also been volunteer and charitable projects. She has served on countless boards and committees because, as she said, she believes in Las Cruces.

While still doing other community work, Heather has tirelessly volunteered at the Emporium, as she and others strive to create a beautifully unique shopping environment and experience.

### AT A GLANCE

#### What roles do you play as a woman?

Wife, mother of four, sister of one, aunt, cousin, daughter, granddaughter, grandmother of four, niece

**What year were you first in the Mesilla Valley?**  
1978

**What's your favorite chile dish in the Mesilla Valley?**  
Chile rellenos

**What is your job?**  
Executive director of several nonprofits over the years

**What is your hobby?**  
Film, needlework, reading

**What inspires you?**  
I've traveled all over the world and have seen what small cities can do, which shows me what we can do in Las Cruces

## GREAT WOMEN DO GREAT THINGS!



*Congratulations!*



**HEATHER POLLARD**  
The Emporium



**CHRIS MAY**  
Mesilla Valley Hospice



# Christine May

## Caring through numbers, she cares in a number of ways

**I**think of our patients each day," said Christine May. "That's what gets me up in the morning."

She's speaking of the patients at Mesilla Valley Hospice, where May is chief financial officer.

"Chris May has had a huge impact on life in this community and is one of the unsung heroines in our town," said one of the people who nominated her for this honor.

May arrived in 2000 with her husband, Charlie, to be close to family, because Charlie had pancreatic cancer at 43. Since his death, May, with great bravery, joy and compassion, has forged ahead, devoting herself to others.

May has been a key figure on the board of the Boys and Girls Club, has served six years on the Doña Ana County Humane Society (her rescue dogs are like family), on the board of the Doña Ana Arts Council, the Las Cruces Downtown Partnership and the Las Cruces Rotary Club. She organizes the Rotary Garage Sale for Mesilla Valley Hospice and has formed the partnership between Rotary and the Hospice Emporium.

She is the financial glue who keeps Mesilla Valley Hospice together. She



**Christine May**

understands and devotes herself to helping those at the end of life and their families. Her profession is a Certified Public Accountant and her obsession is giving back to her community.

### AT A GLANCE

#### What roles do you play as a woman?

Sister of two, granddaughter, aunt of four, niece, cousin, widow

**What year were you first in the Mesilla Valley?**  
2000

**What's your favorite chile dish in the Mesilla Valley?**  
Red enchiladas

**What is your job?**  
Chief Financial Officer, Mesilla Valley Hospice

**What is your hobby?**  
Dogs, bicycling, hiking

**What inspires you?**  
The people of the Mesilla Valley

# Lou Ellen Kay

## Biologist, educator finds hope in younger generations

Lou Ellen Kay asked herself a question. “What can I do that might make a difference?”

The answer: “If we start a school, take these bright kids, and educated them well, maybe some of them might make a difference.”

Here is a look at Lou Ellen from two people who know her quite well.

From Mary McDonald: When my sister, Lou Ellen Kay, moved to the Mesilla Valley, she was a young scientist with a husband and very young child.

She had been doing scientific research and continued doing that and publishing research articles in well-respected scientific journals for many more years. She resumed teaching at the university level and is proud of one of the comments in a student evaluation.

“I thought botany would be boring,” the student wrote. “It’s not!”

Lou Ellen is passionate about teaching and biology, so when some of her students asked her to help them produce an Earth Day, she agreed. She then organized two more Earth Day events in 1990 and 1991 with help from the students and community. Soon after, she became one of the founding board members of the Southwest Environmental Center, where she served for several years.

Lou Ellen has always made things and started making animal-shaped furniture while in Las Cruces. It is shown, to some acclaim, in several galleries.

Now Lou Ellen is working more than full time, with no pay at the school she founded (using her inheritance from our mother, a long-time teacher), the Las Cruces Academy. She teaches science and cursive as well as running day-to-day activities, with the help of her husband

and son and a wonderful group of teachers. She is justifiably proud of how well the students are doing. The Academy recently earned status as a Confucius Classroom, based on the excellence of the Chinese teaching, with similar results learning English and Spanish.

They also have done well in math, science, social studies and music, and in being nice people.

From her husband and colleague, Vince Gutschick:

By dint of 12 years volunteering her time, an estimated 20,000 hours, Dr. Lou Ellen Kay has built, run, and taught at a remarkable school, the Las Cruces Academy. The Academy is a non-profit, private school serving students in early kindergarten through eighth grade.

Noteworthy is her vision of high academics with enveloping emotional and social support for students. She has



Lou Ellen Kay

### AT A GLANCE

**What roles do you play as a woman?**

Wife, mother of one, sister of four, daughter, granddaughter, aunt, niece, cousin

**What year were you first in the Mesilla Valley?**

1985

**What's your favorite chile dish in the Mesilla Valley?**

My homemade chile cheese dish

**What is your job?**

Co-founder, head of Las Cruces Academy

**What is your hobby?**

Making things, including animal furniture and my pond

**What motivates you?**

I am a biologist, and the fear of climate change motivated me to start this school, and maybe some of these bright kids can someday make a difference

engaged many people who gladly helped the vision come to fruition. Volunteers helped set up the physical plant, the curriculum, the website and more. She worked tirelessly to recruit the very best teachers, giving them academic freedom to create a great curriculum that has always adhered to her vision of incorporating three languages – English, Chinese, and Spanish – high-level science (she and I are both career Ph. D. scientists eager to share our passion for science), and a full set of courses from early childhood learning through social studies, art, music, physical education, computer programming and even cursive writing.

Our students thrive, with measured

progress of an average ranking in the top 1 percent nationally with the Iowa Assessments. They love to come to school early and stay late. Two other teachers and I volunteer our time with pleasure. Our son, David, has worked tirelessly to make a content-rich, secure website, [lascrucesacademy.org](http://lascrucesacademy.org).

Lou Ellen leaves our home at 6:30 a.m. each day and comes back at 6:30 p.m., also working weekends on the weekly newsletter and more. Lou Ellen, and all of us, are ever vigilant of student progress and problems that we rectify. We do outreach to the community with student performances and my weekly radio spots on KRWG-FM.



# Las Cruces Academy Celebrates Dr. Lou Ellen Kay!

We, the students, parents, teachers, board, volunteers, and friends of the Las Cruces Academy are so proud of Dr. Lou Ellen Kay. She is our founder, teacher, Head of School, and muse.



We celebrate 10 years of bright, happy students in grades early K through 8 who thrive on challenge.... English, Spanish, Chinese, science, Singapore math, ... even cursive writing! STEAM plus languages and social studies.

We are a non-profit private school with tuition, and also partial scholarships.

Please visit [lascrucesacademy.org](http://lascrucesacademy.org) to learn about us – Lou Ellen, our teachers, our mission, our programs, our students' achievements, our admission process. See our reviews at [GreatSchools.org](http://GreatSchools.org) and other sites.

**Meet Lou Ellen at the school, 1755 Avenida de Mercado, Mesilla  
or call (575) 521-9384, or email her, [director@lascrucesacademy.org](mailto:director@lascrucesacademy.org)**