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STEPPING UP

WHEN THE ECONOMY SLOWS DOWN



Visitors stroll the Santa Fe Botanical Garden.

NEW MEXICAN

BY DEVON JACKSON

FOR ALL THE SADNESS, uncertainty and stress the pandemic has brought this past year, the coronavirus has also brought out much good. For instance, the people of Santa Fe have stepped up to give time, money, attention and more to the city's nonprofit organizations.

Santa Feans do not want their nonprofits — and the people and causes they serve — to fall victim to COVID-19. “What I’ve seen,” says Steven Ovitsky, executive director of the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival, “is that people who are connected to a nonprofit remain connected even more so during this time. They don’t want their favorite nonprofit to go under. So they’ve stepped up. The pandemic has actually been the real builder of a bond between an organization and its loyal supporters. It has shown that if people believe in the mission, they’ll do what they can to see it continue.”

Some of that help has come in the form of increased donations, some in an influx of volunteers. “Our supporters and friends rallied to the garden’s support with donations of \$120,000 in the spring appeal of 2020 and generously donated more than \$180,000 during our 2020 year-end fundraising campaign to help replace unrealized revenues,” says Rick Herrman, director of operations and finance for the Santa Fe Botanical Garden.

The Chamber Music Festival actually grew its endowment, despite having to cancel its 2020 season. The Food Depot, which saw its direct service work double and its food distribution go up by 84 percent, not only had more donations but also, maybe more crucially, attracted a

new army of volunteers, says director of development Jill Dixon. Some of those volunteers — many of them just out of high school or college — became temporary staff, then full-time; in the past year, the Food Depot expanded from 25 employees to 37.

The Santa Fe Community Foundation, which oversees endowment funds and advises many nonprofits and charities in and around Santa Fe, saw both Santa Feans and organizations step up — and fast. “The community has responded on all levels,” says Gabriela Gómez, the foundation’s vice president for advancement. “Donors have given more than ever before.” To release money from its COVID-19 Response Fund, says Gómez, the foundation removed as many of the usual barriers as possible “to get money out the door. . . . We had a record-breaking year in getting money in and out the door.”

What the Santa Fe Community Foundation and many other nonprofits did not have in 2020 were the usual fundraisers — charity balls, auctions and so on. Lisa Vakharia, president of the Professional Business Women of New Mexico, says the organization saw a drop in membership as it focused on helping women-owned businesses navigate the pandemic. Vakharia sees “the nonprofits continuing to shift fundraising efforts digitally to impact donation goals. Most have learned that they cannot continue to have all their eggs in one basket, like in-person galas.”

The people served by food, housing and social service nonprofits, such as the Food Depot, Santa Fe Youth Shelters

and Family Services, and YouthWorks, were among the hardest hit and most in need. “We are a lifeline for many young people, and we could not shut down,” says Youth Shelters executive director Shelly Felt. After adjusting to the new COVID protocols — masks, social distancing and hand washing — staff members rotated their time at the office, which allowed them to continue with their street outreach, emergency shelter and rapid rehousing programs. “We created a walk-up window at our street outreach drop-in center, where young people could obtain necessary supplies, such as water, food, masks, clean socks, sleeping bags or tents,” Felt says. “With the help of donors, we provided inexpensive Chromebooks to many young people in our housing programs so that they could continue to pursue their educational and employment goals through internet online access. And we offered shelter this winter in a local motel.”

YouthWorks also adapted to the pandemic. It quickly pivoted its daily meal preparation and delivery efforts to provide meals curbside at schools and to the homeless at the midtown campus and various hotels. The organization reassigned work crews to help the city with upkeep of parks and trails and even launched two new 1-acre farms on county properties, increasing production of locally grown produce. YouthWorks also saw an increase in donations, new donors and more volunteers. Even better, says executive director Melynn Schuyler, “YouthWorks crews have felt very supported and even more inspired in their work. We know now that our once ‘disconnected’ young people are thriving with the charge to assist others, and we are envisioning expanding our scope to continue this very kind of focus, seeing the benefits of intergenerational interactions and service.”

YouthWorks, the Food Depot and many other organizations partnered with other agencies and nonprofits during the pandemic, and many groups strengthened their ties to the city and county. “Nonprofits came to the rescue on many fronts,” says YouthWorks’ Schuyler. “The lockdown proved to us that we are courageous in how we proceed and that we believe in positive outcomes. The value and pandemic bravery of our organization stepping up to leverage our resources — young people being our main resource — has reinforced the fact that young people are valuable stewards if given the opportunity.”

Dixon of the Food Depot agrees. “The pandemic clarified things for us and brought out the best from every person on staff,” she says. “It highlighted our resilience. It gave us clarity around what our community needed us to be.”



NEW MEXICAN FILE PHOTOS

A staffer with YouthWorks swings a pickaxe at a Santa Fe Habitat for Humanity homesite in Oshara Village.



The Food Depot has seen high demand throughout the pandemic.

The challenge now: What's next?

“What does COVID-19 recovery look like?” asks Gómez of the Santa Fe Community Foundation. “Everyone wants to move on. But there are still people affected by COVID. So how do we continue to help those folks who’ve been devastated? How do we keep money flowing into the Indigenous communities?”

“While everyone’s attention is shifting to recovery, food banks are in the midst of response,” stresses Dixon. “Food banks have not recovered. We expect this direct service level to go on for another 18 months.”

“The goal in this overarching ‘build back even better’ approach,” says Santa Fe Botanical Garden’s Herrman, “is to create a business model that is designed to ensure sustainable operations for years to come.”

“I’d like to be optimistic and say there is no ‘back to normal,’” concludes Gómez. “It’s an opportunity to grow and do things differently.”

Devon Jackson is a writer and editor in Santa Fe. He has written for “The New York Times,” “Outside,” “New Mexico Magazine,” “Rolling Stone,” among other newspapers, magazines and websites.