

2025 Locals

Citizen of the Year Liz Marquez *Showing up for her community*

By Clara Garcia
News-Bulletin Editor

When her daughter entered middle school about 20 years ago, Liz Marquez made the difficult decision to quit her job and become a stay-at-home mom.

It was the best decision of her life — not only for her family but also for her community.

She doesn't need or want any fanfare for what she does, but her unceasing volunteer work, her giving heart and her strong faith has shed light on the many different reasons why Belen resident Liz Marquez is the *Valencia County News-Bulletin's* 2025 Citizen of the Year.

Nominated by Bryan Mascarena, who, himself, is a past Unsung Hero, said Liz exudes what a "true volunteer is."

"Liz has worked tirelessly to make Our Lady of Belen Fiestas the success it has become," said Mascarena, who is also a Fiesta volunteer. "She is the chairperson of the committee ... and spends countless hours with the organization every Fiesta. She is a true leader."

If she had any more enthusiasm, any more dedication or even any more time, Liz would probably use it all to help others. She says other than her family and her faith, there is nothing more important to her than her community.

"Just showing up is the first step in making a difference in the community," she said. "It's a challenge but anybody can do it. You just show up. If you can make your community better, why not? The reward you get from volunteering is amazing."

When Liz stepped down from her career at IT Corporation, an environmental firm, she said it was all about her family.

"There was a big concern about what was going on in the schools so we made the decision that I would stay home," Liz remembers. "It was a big deal because middle school is tough and she was asking questions about drugs and other things. It was time to stay home."

Saying it was the best and biggest decision to give up her career and security, Liz has no regrets. While she and her family were living in Los Lunas at the time, she began volunteering as a cheerleading coach, something she did throughout her daughter's middle and high school years.

When her family — husband, Gabe, and children, Samantha, Ally and Josh — moved back to Belen in 2006, she really got going.

"This is where we're from," Liz says. "This is where we want to be and we immersed ourselves in the community."

As lifelong members of Our Lady of Belen Catholic Church, Liz and Gabe were



Clara Garcia | News-Bulletin photo

Liz Marquez is the relentless volunteer with the Our Lady of Belen Fiestas, Valencia County Fair, 4-H and FFA. She is the *News-Bulletin's* 2025 Citizen of the Year.

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Unsung Heroes Friends of the Belen Public Library *Engaging the Community*

By Kenn Rodriguez

News-Bulletin Staff Writer

Gathered in the lobby of their storefront bookstore, Books on Becker, the board members of the Friends of the Belen Public Library chat freely and happily.

The group was nominated and selected as one of the *Valencia County News-Bulletin's* 2025 Unsung Heroes.

As anyone who has ever been there might notice, Books on Becker is less a bookstore than it is a clubhouse for book lovers.

"Our goal is to increase the literacy within our community, and we have a number of different ways we're approaching that," said board vice president Maggy Fitzgerald. "One of which, as you can see, is that kids coming in here get two free books every time they walk through the door, and that's not just small children. It's kids all the way up to college age."

Fitzgerald points out enthusiastically that Books on Becker, or as they affectionately call it, "BOB," sell its books "at a really cheap price, because they come from donations from the community."

Hardcovers got for a dollar a piece, she continues. Smaller paperbacks are priced at 50 cents a piece. The selection ranges from fiction to non-fiction, children's picture books to classic novels.

"We donate books to a number of different places as well," Maggy said enthusiastically. "Currently, we give new and gently-used books to the public health office. They need about 40 percent of their books in Spanish. We also give books to the Angel Tree, to the Head Start Program, to the women's shelter and to the adult literacy program. It's a big list."

As stated on its website, "the Friends of the Belen Public Library is a 501(c)3 nonprofit with heart — and we heart the Library!"

The organization's primary charge is to support the programs and initiatives of the Belen Public Library by providing funding and volunteers. One of the group's main initiatives is the Belen library's Summer Reading Programs for children, teens and adults, as well as administering the Deborah Graham Memorial Scholarships for local college-bound high school seniors.

The Friends also take on support of initiatives such as technology enhancements for the Teen Room and nonfic-

tion book acquisitions for the Children's Room.

Of course, there's also BOB, the secondhand bookstore at 513 Becker Ave. in the downtown Belen Arts and Cultural District, which is open from noon to 5 p.m., Tuesday to Saturday.

As one might expect, the Friends have a soft spot for teachers. Maggy said the group often gets requests for help from teachers who are in need of books, supplies or even technology.

"Teachers would come to us and say, 'This is something I need,' and we would look it over, vote for it, and provide it," she said. "I think one of our greatest things that we've given was last year. A local teacher wanted a translator system. She had many children that only spoke Spanish, and she was teaching science. So we bought her the translator system so she could speak into a microphone and the kids heard it in their headphones, in their own language. That was one of my favorites."

As part of their ongoing membership with the Belen Public Library, the Friends have begun supporting free guitar lessons at the library.

"There's a pop-up show with (musician) Tony DiNardo," said board member and librarian Kathleen Pickering, who is also the director of the Belen Public Library. "He provides instruction for free. And the Friends have purchased guitars so we could start the program. After a child sticks with lessons for at least one year, they receive a gift of a guitar."

Community engagement is also something the Friends of the Belen Public Library are committed to doing. In addition to the two student scholarships they sponsor, the group participates in National Night Out events, the Valencia County Resource Center and the annual Scarecrow Festival on Becker Street in Belen, by distributing children's books. They also take books to laundromats and place them in "little libraries" around town, said president Mary Swanson.

The community impact is also felt among the elderly population in Belen, as board members point out, BOB provides a valued space for seniors and fosters a love of books among customers and volunteers.

"One of the original ideas was that (the bookstore) would give the senior community a place to feel valued," Maggy said. "That was one of the ideas behind it."

The current board members said The Friends of the Belen Library incorporated as a nonprofit in 2011 but has existed since the 1990s. In that time, the partnership with the Belen



Library has been central to its efforts, said treasurer Merita Wilson.

Currently, the group has 83 members and is always looking for new members and volunteers. And, as several members point out, members do not need to be from Belen to participate. The group has participants who come from Socorro, Los Lunas and Albuquerque to play a part in the Friends' mission and activities.

Several board members said the group has been a great addition to their lives in many ways, and they feel a personal enjoyment and empowerment by volunteering and being out in the community.

"You asked why (we're part of the group). Well, first of all, all the membership reads. So when you make a reference to something, everybody laughs because they get it. Right? OK. Because they write it up to understand what's going on," said board member Terese "Tinky" Ulivarri, to a chorus of laughter.

"I think more than anything, my want here is for the kids because the better off they read, the better off they'll be in their lives. So that's why I'm here."

Board member Mary Esquibel summed up both BOB and the Friends at the end of the conversation.

"The word that comes to mind to me about this place and everybody is that it's alive," she said. "Books can take you places. They talk to you. They teach you. They — it's life. I am impressed with all of these people here, and I love seeing family members and friends come in."

"And the conversations are wonderful," she concluded.

selected to be the Fiesta padrinos. Honored by having been chosen, Liz decided she would continue volunteering with the Fiestas and became a member of the committee.

At first, Liz would volunteer to do whatever was needed — slinging sodas and chicken legs. Then she was in charge of the Fiesta Queen committee. After a few years, she became more involved and has been the committee chairperson for several years. To date, Liz has volunteered on the OLB Fiesta committee for 17 years.

The Our Lady of Belen Fiestas is the oldest and largest weekend event in Valencia County. It's a tradition that's been here for more than 200 years, and it takes a lot of volunteers and a lot of work to plan and put on the annual mid-August event.

The committee members help with everything from deriving the theme, and bringing everything together from the vendors and parade, security and the car show, bingo and the salsa and royalty contest.

"We have amazing people in the committee who make it easy for me," she said. "We have these strong people who work very hard for this event, for our church, for our community. It's always been a tradition in our church, and it's an annual event that everyone looks forward to. It's almost like a family reunion. It's a big celebration."

As the major fundraiser for the parish, Liz says a lot rides on the Fiestas, which is enjoyed by members of the surrounding churches, people from all across the state and even from those returning home from out-of-state.

"I want our community to succeed. We all want this



Photo courtesy of Connie Baca

Liz Marquez with her husband, Gabe, right, and their children Ally and Josh, with former OLB pastor Father Clement Niggel.

event to succeed every year," she said. "It's an honor to be a part of it and I'm always looking for more parishioners to help.

"It's amazing when a community comes together — Catholic or not — to celebrate each other and to honor our faith."

Liz doesn't just lead the OLB Fiesta committee; she's been heavily involved in the local 4-H and FFA programs as well as the cherished Valencia County Fair.

She has been a 4-H leader for the Country Camo club, which has 70 members throughout the county.

"I grew up doing 4-H and FFA, and showed horses. That's where my kids learned," she said. "My son is a baseball player, and likes raising animals a little, but my daughter, Ally, that's her sport. My oldest (Samantha) also rode horses."

This is her third year on the Valencia County Fair Board. She volunteered for a year, then was a member for a year and was just



Submitted photo

Liz Marquez, back right, has been a 4-H leader in Valencia County since her children were young.

elected president last month. She gives credit to the past president, Lincoln Hill, for bringing the fair back to its glory.

"I have big shoes to fill. They have a great community, but I have to admit it's a little intimidating because it's a lot," she said. "They have a lot of volunteers and they do it for the kids. They work so hard to make sure the kids have a great place to

show their animals."

As the board continues to negotiate with Valencia County to take over ownership the property, she is hopeful it will be best for the community as the fair will continue on as usual.

"Our main goal is to make sure the fair keeps going. The county has a lot more access to grants," she said. "Right now, the fairgrounds is maintained by volunteers,



Submitted photo

Liz Marquez helps a youngster brush her cow, one of many volunteer activities she does.

and we're always fundraising to keep it going."

As one of the biggest cheerleaders for children in Valencia County, Liz says the fair is for everyone, and hopes to get more high school students involved — regardless if they're involved in 4-H or FFA.

"It's not just a livestock show, it's a county fair.

Along with all the livestock our kids work so hard with, we have our indoor exhibits — flower arrangements, photography and more,"

she said. "The livestock is 75 percent of the fair, and we support our kids and their work 100 percent. It's a year-long commitment for them with their animals, and we're trying to make it great for the kids, letting people and businesses know what they have and what they can get."

As her stint as chairwoman just begins, she has plans for the future of the fair. She wants to invite more public input and make it bigger and better for everyone.

While what she does for the community might seem a bit overwhelming for some, she says it's remarkable how satisfying it is to help others.

"Yes, it can sometimes be stressful, but how else do you improve your community? I've met so many amazing people I would have never met. It's just like growing your family.

"Being a positive influence in a child's life can make all the difference in their future," she added.

Liz has made it a point to teach her children the act of giving of their time to make a better community.

"When you give of your time, that's the biggest gift you can give anybody," Liz said. "At that point, it's not volunteering anymore — it's something I have to do. It's part of who I am. It's giving of yourself, living your best life."

Unsung Hero

Barbara Bradley-Buttram

Volunteering as a voice in her community

By Julia M. Dendinger
News-Bulletin Assistant Editor

Growing up, watching her grandparents and parents volunteer in their communities, Barbara Bradley-Buttram absorbed those lessons and proudly says she comes from “a family that gives.”

She has also made it a priority to volunteer for her own community and to be an example to her daughter, Annie.

Bradley-Buttram’s willingness to give to and support her community didn’t go unnoticed. La Promesa Elementary community school coordinator retired Gen. Andrew Salas nominated her as a *Valencia County News-Bulletin* Unsung Hero this year, citing her extensive volunteer work at LPE that includes helping with snack sales, serving on the Promise Keeper Team as a parent advocate/volunteer, donating hundreds of dollars of merchandise for the Student Leadership Club student store and serving as a chaperon for student field trips.

“She sets the example for her daughter, Annie, to be a life-long learner by her enrollment in a nursing course of study,” Salas wrote in his nomination. “She has come to after-school meetings to share in finding solutions to issues, and to consider new and better ways of inspiring students and improving outcomes.”

“She is truly a shining example of determined public service and self-improvement with no expectation or desire for accolades that anyone can witness, be inspired by and emulate.”

Growing up in Corona and the Carrizozo area of Lincoln County, Bradley-Buttram and her family “moved over the mountain” to Veguita in 2017 to be closer to medical care.

In 2019, she found out just how special her community was when her husband took his own life.

“Valencia County has been a very special place because they’ve been incredibly supportive and kind through that incident,” she said. “They have been incredibly helpful, especially Freedom Worship Center and Sunshine Church. I have attended both and they walked with us through that.”

Bradley-Buttram said she wanted to be part of a vital community and decided



Barbara Bradley-Buttram has been volunteering her time and using her voice to advocate for her daughter and other students at La Promesa Elementary Schools. She also volunteers at a few churches in Valencia County.

to find a way to volunteer because “it’s rewarding to give back to the county and community that has given to us.”

It started with popping popcorn on Friday’s at La Promesa where her daughter was a student. Studying at the University of New Mexico-Valencia Campus to become a physician’s assistant, she had Fridays free — the day the popcorn needed popping.

“They needed someone to help and I said, ‘I can do that.’ I wanted to know the kind of place my kid was. I wanted to know about where the students are, know the teachers, know the administration,” Bradley-Buttram said. “I wanted to be able to be involved in the decision-making processes, to be a voice in what is happening with my child.”

Known as a “community school,” La Promesa actively engages students, their parents and community members in the success and direction of the school, seeking not only support but guidance from all stakeholders. One requirement of the community



school grant LPE received is to have a site-based leadership team that incorporates parents, students, community members and educators. The team at La Promesa is fittingly called the Promise Keepers.

“We were able to establish the Promise Keepers to bring about something that is going to be lasting,” she said. “Something that’s going to be not just today or tomorrow, but something that’s going to be a forever kind of thing.”

Having a connection to her spiritual community also sustains Bradley-Buttram, and she has found ways to give back there too. When she saw the logo for the Chihuahua Bible Chapel’s vacation Bible school a couple years, she thought, “We could hake that a little more exciting.”

She approached the Veguita chapel’s Pastor Lee Ridley and asked if she could add some color to the logo. He gave his blessing.

“Last year, I got to create a logo and then

it was on the t-shirts. It was really a surreal moment to see that logo on all the kids,” she said. “It was a calling card so the kids could have a moment of Biblical education in the summer for a community-based VBS, since it’s several churches that come together.”

Bradley-Buttram also volunteers for her church, Freedom Worship Center in Los Lunas, which works with New Life Church of God in Albuquerque, which was struggling to stay afloat.

“There was 10 people in their building and they couldn’t afford to pay the bills. There were five of us who went to do a rebuild. It is becoming more vibrant,” she said. “I’m the ministry operations director and do administration work.”

As the church is being rebuilt, it’s members and Bradley-Buttram are making connections with the community, offering support to clients in a nearby rehabilitation facility.

“Some of the guys there will come across the street for pizza. They come and find hope. Some of them are on staff now,” she said. “They come and just find consistency.”

In addition to volunteering in her community, and beyond, Bradley-Buttram is working to earn a degree so she can be a physician’s assistant. A former EMT, she wants to pursue a career in health care, but needs the math and science credits for the PA degree.

“I have a bachelor’s degree but it’s in church ministries, so I’ve been diligently working my way through the math and sciences classes,” she said.

As she continues on her academic path, Bradley-Buttram hopes her example will inspire her daughter to continue what has become a family tradition.

“I saw my parents volunteer. My mom worked at the senior center when I was a kid and my dad volunteered at the VFW,” Bradley-Buttram says. “I saw my grandparents give. I saw my uncle give. We were from a family that gives. When I was growing up in Carrizozo, we ran a food bank. I want my daughter to grow up and be a giver.”



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Unsung Hero

Steve Togami

Creating opportunities for children

By Clara Garcia
News-Bulletin Editor

Making life better for children and providing a path for their future is what motivates Steve Togami to be involved in the community.

His involvement and dedication is why he was nominated and chosen as a 2025 *Valencia County News-Bulletin* Unsung Hero.

The Las Maravillas resident was nominated by Marilyn Winters, a longtime volunteer herself, who, along with her husband, Jim, were also selected as past Unsung Heroes.

"I nominated Steve Togami as he is always the first to volunteer for the activities of the (Rio Communities) Optimist (Club) and many other organizations," Winters said. "He always serves with a smile and a happy attitude. He loves working with the children and is always looking for new ways to involve children."

Oh, what a smile — sweet and contagious.

"I love being able to help others," Togami said. "There are more people who are less fortunate than I am, and we just try and make sure they have a happy day."

Togami knows the community well. He grew up in Valencia County, learning and working on his family's vegetable farm, Togami Farms, off N.M. 47 and El Cerro Loop. There, he learned about community, and what it means to be a part of it.

He learned the value of community from his parents, who not only farmed the land, but set up a vegetable stand where they met and made friends throughout the valley.

"We grew all different vegetables — green chile, sweet corn, melons, tomatoes, peppers," he remembers. "That's what my mom did. It was very popular. We would ship our green chile all over the country to people who were from here and moved away."

He said he and his two siblings watched their mom and dad interact with the com-

munity, and realized that they were not only farmers and business owners, but they were part of something bigger than themselves or their family.

"My mom and dad used to farm in Albuquerque, but they loved it here. They moved to Los Lunas in 1960," he said. "When they closed the farm, my mom said she missed the people the most. She enjoyed talking to other people."

Togami earned a bachelor's degree in accounting and his MBA from New Mexico State University. He spent most of his working life here in New Mexico, except the 10 years he worked in California. He retired in April 2024 after working 25 years at Aristech Acrylics LLC, south of Rio Communities, as both the human resources and accounting manager.

But his work within the community has been what he enjoys the most — working with and for the children in Valencia County.

Togami is a charter member and past president of the Rio Communities Optimist Club, a fairly new volunteer organization that is committed to "bringing out the best in youth communities."

"It's all about the kids — all the different events throughout the year," he said. "We want to offer events free of charge for our children in the community. We try to bring things that they normally wouldn't have or to participate in."

The RCOC just had its annual fundraising golf tournament, which raises funds so the club can sponsor events for the local children and community.

"We'll be having a trunk or treat for the kids at Halloween, and a bike safety course in November at La Merced Elementary," he said. "We'll put a little roadway course out there, and then we'll give away a bike and a helmet to a lucky boy and girl."

In December, the club invites Santa and Mrs. Claus for a special day to visit with the children, where fun activities are held and snacks and hot chocolate is served.

"At the national level, they have an essay



and oratorical contest, so we try to get local kids from here to participate. They can move up to the state and national levels to win a scholarship," he explained.

The RCOC also sponsors an annual Youth Appreciation Day, where they have a lot of fun with games and activities, ice cream sundaes and snacks — all for free.

One of Togami's favorite activities with the Optimist club is the photography contest, which is open to all middle and high school students in the county. He has been the lead on this project for about four years.

"If you have an interest in photography, this is a great way to show off your skills," he said. "We have a different theme every year."

New this year, the Optimist club sponsored a Daddy Daughter Dance on Valentine's Day at Tierra del Sol Golf Club.

"Our Lego Robotics Camp held every summer sparks interest in engineering," Togami touts. "We have a lot of kids who come back every summer, but we also have a lot of new kids. It definitely fills up fast. We got a grant from Meta to help with those expenses."

Along with their own events, the Optimists also partner with other organizations and agencies, including the Rio Communities police and fire departments, the Moose Lodge and its auxiliary for their annual Easter egg hunt and with the Moose Riders.

"Now that I'm retired, I just have more time, which I'm more than happy to do. The best part about doing all these events is seeing all those kids smiles and how happy they are," he said. "It's also nice when the parents come up and say, 'thank you.' They appreciate what we're doing."

If you think Togami's volunteer work is done, it's not. He's been an active member of the Community Wellness Council,

which promotes health and wellness in the community, and the Valencia County Partnership for a Work Ready Community, which is an organization reaching out to local businesses and students to make connections.

"It's a group that brings together local businesses and local schools," he said. "We go to the high schools and we encourage students to graduate. That's the most important thing. There are jobs out there that need people — and they're right here in Valencia County."

For Togami, community means a lot, and so does his culture. Even though he doesn't know the language or has never been to the homeland, he has been heavily involved in Japanese American Citizens League, an organization his parents were involved in.

Togami has held different positions within the organization, including as president. He said He stepped down so he could concentrate more on the groups here in Valencia county.

"There's a lot of people who are interested in learning about the Japanese culture, and there are probably a lot more people who know more than I do," he said. "I've never been to Japan. When we have the festivals, a lot of people know the language, which I don't."

As a person who constantly volunteers, Togami never takes for granted that he's not alone. He has a community who continues to work with him and for children.

"We're not working individually, we work as a team, which makes it a lot easier," he said. "People should volunteer because it helps others, but it also helps yourself. You get that nice feeling, and hoping you're making a positive impact on others. Everyone needs to help each other, spread more positive than negative."

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Unsung Hero

Amy Torres

Finding homes for our furry friends

By Mike Powers

News-Bulletin Sports Writer

It has only been a few months since Amy Torres, of Los Lunas, has been volunteering at the Valencia County Animal Shelter, but her impact has been “extraordinary.”

Torres, 41, is too shy to bark out her own praises. Leave that to Michelle Barreras, a fellow volunteer at the shelter.

Barreras applauds the “compassion and dedication” of Torres, who has “made a profound impact on our community.” With those attributes, Amy has been selected as one of this year’s *Valencia County News-Bulletin* Unsung Heroes.

“I appreciate this so much,” said Torres, anxious to put the spotlight on all the animals needing a home.

Like other volunteers at the shelter, Torres will clean kennels, take dogs out for play-time, and do other chores as needed to help out the staff. Those efforts usually take place on a Friday or Saturday, as Torres commutes Monday through Thursday between Los Lunas and Socorro for an accounting job at her father’s businesses.

Wherever Torres is at, thoughts of the animals are never far away. To get the word out to would-be adopters, Torres created a Facebook page, 2nd Chance for Fur-Babies, Valencia County and surrounding areas, which has been a howling success.

“Every day, I post about three to five dogs,” said Torres, who is known by Amy Lynn on the Facebook page. “How they are, their demeanor,” often getting help with pictures and videos from other volunteers.

When Torres arrives home from Socorro, “I just post and post and post. I have this notebook that I started with all the dogs,” about 275 of them.

Torres proudly adds, “We have had 185 to 200 adoptions since I started,” including Asher, an 8-year-old pitbull mix who found a home last week.

Barreras, who regularly holds pet adoptions at the Smokal dispensary in Belen, says the videos that Torres spends hours on reach an untapped audience.

“A lot of people don’t want to go to the shelter because it’s sad,” Barreras observed.



Submitted photos

Unsung Hero Amy Torres, sitting with one of the dogs from the Valencia County Animal Shelter, started a Facebook page to showcase the animals available for adoption.

However, after seeing the posts, the reaction is, “Oh my goodness. I really want one of those. They’re actually getting to connect with these animals over Facebook.”

“When I wake up in the morning my Facebook messages have skyrocketed,” from people interested in adopting, said Torres. “They send me photos once they adopt, which I love. Sometimes I cry because I am happy.”

A recent video post highlighted Adeera, an American bully. It shared Adeera’s age, 5-years-old, that she was surrendered by a previous owner and that she needs to be the only dog in the home.

“We can tell she’s had a tough life,” the post mentions. “She absolutely adores humans. She lights up when someone stops by her kennel. She’s affectionate, loyal, and just wants to be near you. Who knows? You might be the one she’s been waiting for.”

If it tugs on your heartstrings, that’s the idea.

Most of these posts are spent on dogs, Torres says, because cats and kittens are often scooped up quickly by those looking

for a companion. Torres chooses to put the spotlight on older canines, often given up by their owners.

“He’s been there for a couple of months,” Torres said of one featured dog. “Everyone just passes him by.”

Which is what makes caring so much for animals gut wrenching and yet, at times, uplifting.

“It is hard work. It isn’t always fun,” Torres said frankly. “But there’s also amazing moments where the dogs you see for two months are now getting adopted.”

There is also the pressure of knowing that if the shelter gets overcrowded, animals could be euthanized.

“Sometimes I get a little stressed, but I just remember what it’s for,” Torres said. “It’s for saving the animals and it’s for finding them homes and getting them off the streets or out of the shelter.”

For as long as Torres can remember, she has had a passion for our furry friends.

“I would always try to pick up little kittens from the end of the road,” Torres recalled. “I wanted to save every animal. If

it was a coyote, I wanted to save it. If it was a raccoon, I wanted to save it. It’s always been with me.”

Several years back, Torres was involved in a movement to save feral, stray and abandoned animals in Valencia County.

“I’m just happy we could get some of those kittens and mamas fixed, in their new homes and off the street,” she said.

Both Torres and Barreras encourage people thinking about getting a pet to avoid non-licensed breeders that sometimes set up shop along the roadways. Whether you are interested in what some might call a mutt, or a designer dog, sometimes referred to as a “boujee,” Barreras says the Valencia County Animal Shelter has recently taken in sought-after English bulldogs, shih tzus and dobermans.

It’s not just volunteer work at the shelter or on the internet for Torres, who recently began running the Valencia County Animal Service government website. Torres purchased supplies for a woman who wanted to adopt but didn’t have the resources, like a doggie bed.

“She goes above and beyond,” added Barreras, who nominated Torres as an Unsung Hero. “She has traveled and taken many dogs to Santa Fe to rescue, to T or C to rescue — on her own dime, on her own time. I’ve just seen the remarkable things that she’s done.”

Before Torres could answer when asked what her next project might be, she is interrupted by her own pet dog barking. A rescue dog, of course.

“I wish there were more volunteers,” Torres said. “I think more changes could be made if there were more people helping.”

When Torres and her fiancé, Stephen, first contemplated what it takes to volunteer, she thought to herself, “There needs to be change, but you can’t change things unless you’re involved.”

Unsung Heroes

Manny and Marcelle Trujillo

Serving together in faith

By Kenn Rodriguez
News-Bulletin Staff Writer

Manny and Marcelle Trujillo have a simple formula for success — both in marriage and community service.

“Doing things together as a couple usually helps quite a bit,” Manny said as Marcelle nodded and smiled next to him in his office on the campus of Our Lady of Belen Catholic Church.

“I mean, you know, sometimes I’m tired and she has another place to go,” he continued. “Well, you know, you get up and you’re going to be doing the same thing. The other community is the same thing. She’s tired and I’ve got to go. We’re all together, I guess.”

Both in their early 70s, Marcelle and Manny have been mainstays in the OLB parish as well as the Belen community at large. Manny’s main service has come as a deacon. Marcelle works alongside him in the church community but has also made her mark on the board of directors for the Human Resource Center in Belen.

In her Unsung Heroes nomination letter, Holly Chavez concluded the nomination with a striking statement that sums up their inclusion:

“Where there is a need, you will often find them there, providing a helping hand,” Chavez wrote.

The duo started their lives together, fittingly in a church. Manny, who grew up in Los Chavez, and Marcelle, who was born in Santa Rosa, were paired up for Manny’s cousin’s wedding in Albuquerque.

“We met at the rehearsal,” Marcelle remembers, “because I was living in Albuquerque at the time, and the rest is history.”

The two went on a date soon after that and were married in 1973. After some time in Las Cruces, they moved with their three children to Los Chavez and found a spiritual home at Our Lady of Belen. They have resided in Rio Communities since 1996 and cross the Rio Grande almost daily for their community activities.

Over the years, their community service has taken many different forms for the Trujillos. Once they moved to Los Chavez, they got involved with the Knights of Columbus and Catholic Daughters.

Marcelle worked in finance at the First National Bank (now Wells Fargo), helping the community with a personal approach to banking, as well as teaching classes at OLB and assisting Manny in ministry.

Manny spent many years as a musician, performing

around the county as well as in the church music group for 23 years. How he became a deacon is quite the story.

“I came from Las Cruces in ’76 and they were looking for good deacons. They asked me, and I said, ‘Well, I don’t know,’” he recalled.

“And then a couple years later, somebody else would ask me, and I said, ‘I still can’t,’” he said, revealing that his introverted nature played a part.

“You bargained with God,” Marcelle said, laughing.

“Yeah, I bargained with God the whole time,” he said with a chuckle. “The music at church was nice because I could focus. But anyway, I said, ‘Well, if you really want me to become a deacon, I want three things.’”

Manny wanted three musical milestones to happen: 1. To have a recording of a variety of music. 2. To make a recording of mariachi music. And 3. A Christian CD. But there was one more thing he asked for: A person to come to him in black, white and red.

Marcelle asked, “Why did you ask for that? Manny said, “I don’t know. It just came out of me.”

One day, as he was serving as a Eucharistic minister, a little girl came asking for a blessing — wearing black shoes, white leggings and a red dress.

“She came up to her blessing, and she was so, so reverent. I’ve never seen anybody do it so reverently, that she bowed her head and crossed her arms and she bowed in front of me to give a blessing,” he remembered.

When someone pointed that out, he knew he was closer, but Manny had one more request.

“I said, ‘OK, I know it’s you, but I just need one more thing. I need a priest to ask me to be a deacon,’” he said.

When a priest asked him into his office, Manny thought, “Uh on, I’m in trouble.”

“I went in, closed the door and sat down,” he related. “He said, ‘What did you think of becoming a deacon?’ And I said, ‘I don’t think there’s nothing else in my mind ...’ The answer was only one word, and that was yes.”

These days, both Marcelle and Manny are retired in the work sense, but working as hard in the community. Marcelle works with the Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion, and recently retired from teaching CCD (Confraternity of Christian Doctrine) after 15 years.

Marcelle also holds the office of financial secretary in the Catholic Daughters and volunteers at the OLB offices. She also helps Manny with the Ministry of Consolation, saying he is “The main guy there.”

His 28 years in that position include many duties, ranging from administering First Holy Communion classes for the



Kenn Rodriguez | News-Bulletin photo

Marcelle and Manny Trujillo are committed to community service, both in the secular and church community of Belen.

little ones to ministering to the elderly at Genesis’ Belen Meadows Healthcare and Rehabilitation Center.

The couple have also worked in ACTS, (Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication) a program that teaches structured personal prayer. They are now involved in the CORE program (Christ-Oriented Real-Life Evangelization) at Our Lady of Belen.

At the end of the day, serving together is a blessing, they say.

“Doing things together really is a good thing to do,” Manny said. “Because you’re not just serving one person, not all the time. Sometimes you do, but you’re actually serving a community because they invite you and then there’s something in the ministry that entices them to tell somebody else and then somebody else and somebody else.”

“And then we start getting people involved in the church, and that’s the whole thing, especially the younger ones. The younger ones are the ones that are the future of the church. We have to show them that it’s OK to do it when you’re as young as we are.”

Unsung Heroes

Valencia County Resource Center volunteers

A community of volunteers

By Julia M. Dendinger

News-Bulletin Assistant Editor

They say it brings them joy. Feeds the spirit. Humbles them.

Volunteering a few hours a week to give back to their community has become a passion for three Valencia County residents. They found the Valencia County Resource Center in Belen through different paths, but their willingness to give of their time and serve those in need unites them.

Patsy Johnson, Steven Sanchez and Erika Novich have all been volunteering at the center for about six months but in that time they've left an impression on Sara Gonzalez, an adult resource assessment specialist at the center.

Gonzalez nominated all three as *Valencia County News-Bulletin* Unsung Heroes this year, and they are being honored collectively for their work.

Using words like "wonderful," "amazing" and "giver," Gonzalez said the three truly make a difference at the center.

"Erika believes the resource center humanizes people and gives them a safe space. She spreads her love through the community and through her selfless charitable acts in organizations," Gonzalez said in her nomination of Novich.

She described Sanchez as a "pillar in the community," who believes the mission of the resource center is critical.

"The impact that Steven has made is far and wide within the community, thanks to his extremely charitable donations as well as surprises for resource (center) management to make things run smoother for everyone," she said.

Gonzalez said Johnson "admits she tends to get in trouble because she is a giver, but she loves to help and give back. She devotes most of her time, including budgeting monthly to support (the center) to better the lives of our clients, and she is recognized for making the center full of love."

Another commonality the three share is working in the education field — Sanchez and Novich as teachers and Johnson on the clerical side.

When Sanchez came to the center and introduced himself, he was immediately



Julia M. Dendinger | News-Bulletin photo

Working together at the Valencia County Resource Center, volunteers Patsy Johnson, Erika Novich and Steven Sanchez make the community a better place.

"hooked on their mission to assist those in the community who need some help. It isn't just for homeless people. It's for anyone who is struggling and having a hard time making ends meet. I see families coming in with young children and it's a good place to come for them. It fills your heart with joy."

Volunteering and being able to work in places where she could support others was a lifelong desire for Novich.

"In working for others, you're kind of working for yourself. It humbles you," she said. "I think it makes you gracious for the things you have."

Being able to work with people experiencing homelessness was on Johnson's heart, so when she heard the center needed volunteers, she knew she had to go.

"I've been abandoned, so to speak, so I knew what it was. I thought to myself, 'I'm going to contribute,'" she said.

Most of the trio's weekly hours at the center are spent sorting donations and stocking the shelves with household goods and hanging clothes on the racks.

In addition to her time at the resource center, Novich volunteers at a local food

bank and community garden, as well as Books on Becker, the Belen Art League and the Valencia County chapter of the New Mexico Ramp Project, which builds ramp at people's homes for accessibility.

"My big dream once was to go to Africa. At this age, I probably won't get to do that but I'm fulfilling my dream by volunteering here, and every day of the week I have a little volunteer job," she said. "When you support the community you're in and you recognize the needs of your community through volunteering, in being humble, it feeds your spirit."

Sanchez and Johnson's volunteer efforts are focused on the resource center for now, but they did take time to "tell" on each other's efforts.

"She won't say it, so I'll say it for her. She goes to Walmart and comes back with a trunk load of food for the center for folks," said Sanchez of Johnson. "She's giving up her own resources to support what goes on here."

Turn about is fair play, so Johnson says when Sanchez saw her come to the center with a load of food, he asked if Walmart

made a donation.

"I said, 'No, I have a small budget that I use once a month,' and he contributed a nice chunk of money to that budget," Johnson said.

Johnson waves off the compliment, saying she's been very fortunate in his life.

"The good Lord gave me a good brain and a good job, and I've made plenty of money," he said. "So, retirement is good. I've been fortunate that way. If I can share with others who need it, I'm happy to do it."

Whether it's an Amazon haul of men's socks or shorts and t-shirts she finds on clearance, Johnson is more than happy to bring what he can to the center.

All three are quick to point out how kind, engaging and respectful the center staff is, saying the people who work there are a big reason they continue to contribute and volunteer.

"They are so accommodating and helpful to the clients," Johnson said. "When I leave, I always feel so much better than when I got here. They are very joyful people."

Novich agrees, saying the staff is a big part of what drew her to the center.

"This is a place where people are recognized. What I've learned with kids is, if somebody recognizes you, they become part of your circle and that's a powerful thing," she said. "The staff here gives a tremendous amount of respect to everybody who comes in, no matter what the situation is."

Raised to care for others in his community, Sanchez said he believes "we have a responsibility to care for our brothers and our sisters. My grandmother talked to us kids a lot about that. My mom and dad were insistent that we try to help others."

Johnson learned the same lessons growing up, she said.

"We were taught to help the neighbor clean their house, pull weeds, cook a meal for someone that might not be feeling well," she said. "I follow in the steps of Jesus. Our hearts are there for these people. When I was younger, I had needs and people in my community met those needs, gave us food when my kids were little and I was abandoned. I just feel like I gotta' return what was given to me."

HISTORY OF HONOREES

Since 1995, the Valencia County News-Bulletin has been recognizing a Citizen of the Year and Unsung Heroes each year.

They're all people who do things out of the goodness of their hearts — folks who go above and beyond for their community.

The following names are a list of the folks who have been recognized in the past 20 years by the *Valencia County News-Bulletin*.

- 2005: Lillie McNabb, Citizen of the Year; Unsung Heroes: Paul and Loretta Baca, Irene Dockery, Wendall Doty, Amador Griego, Frank Gurule, Bryan Mascareña, Sally Milavec and Gloria Sanchez.

- 2006: Filomena Baca, Citizen of the Year; Unsung Heroes: Sylvia Aragon, DeLaHunt family, Dolores Garcia, Karen Jarratt, Steve Kuenzler, Mike and Mary Merrell, Geneva Nixon, Mark Rosenblum and David Velenzuela.

- 2007: George and Diana Trujeque, Citizens of the Year; Unsung Heroes: Bill Brown, Manuel Gallegos, Sandra Gonzales, Jackie Jaramillo, Stacey Johnston, Tone E. Padilla, Joe Saiz, Mary T. Sanchez, Lydia and Nicole Trujillo and Richard Walker.

- 2008: James and Rosie Garley, Citizens of the Year; Unsung Heroes: Mary Andersen, Laura Avila, the Branch Coffee Shop Gang, Lisa Chavez, David Gabaldon, Therese Hidalgo, Maria Marez, Joe Marquez, Richard Tafoya and Doris Vesel.

- 2009: Louis Lusero, Citizen of the Year; Unsung Heroes: Susan Cordova, Richard Ditrach, Jose Hernandez, Janice Knowlton, Robert Miller, Jan Pacifico, Ashley Rechkemmer, Hiltrud Ridenour, Arturo Saiz, Ronnie Tabet and Carolyn Taylor.

- 2010: Molly Madden, Citizen of the Year; Unsung Heroes: John Dear, Tom

and Pat Fritts, Eddy Gomes, John Montano, George Moscona, Lenore Pena, Scott Rhodes, Mike Silva, Cyndi Sluder and Michael Vallejos.

- 2011: Matthew Aragon, Citizen of the Year; Unsung Heroes: Helen Abeyta, David Adame, Jon Clemons, Peggy Gutjahr, David and Pamela Doster, Catherine Jojola, Madga Rundles, Daniel Silva and the Ditch Bank Bandits, Richard Chavez, Al Santistevan and Dennis Storey, Sandy Wells and Cindy Wacek.

- 2012: Jim Lane, Citizen of the Year; Unsung Heroes: Cecilia "CeCe" Aragon and Patti Bucklew, Shirley Blackwell, Cindy Clark, Linda Erickson, Candace Johnston, Gene Kastelic, John Michael Nagy, Teresa Romero, Rebecca Romine and Jim Schnitzler.

- 2013: Martin Sisneros, Citizen of the Year; Unsung Heroes: Baldwin G. Burr, Leona Herrell, Dubra Karnes-Padilla, Mike Moreno, David and Cynthia Moya, Casey Pena, Karin Trujillo, Richard White and the 13th Judicial District Court Free Legal Clinic.

- 2014: Charles Cox, Citizen of the Year; Unsung Heroes: Bobby Caldwell, Bob and Mary Courtney, Jason Gonzales, Heidi Green, Jose and Pauline Hernandez, Helga Woerner and Senior Citizen Bands.

- 2015: Mark Rosenblum, Citizen of the Year; Unsung Heroes: Fillie Baca, Rhona Espinoza, Tom Hershberger, Jo Stasi, John Taylor, Daniel Torres and Jim and Marilyn Winters.

- 2016: Mario Tapia, Citizen of the Year; Unsung Heroes: Jennifer Hise, Nicki Owen, Jim Rende, George and Loretta Torres, Lisa Wade, Theo Welky and Jeffrey Woods.

- 2017: Rosie Chavez, Citizen of the Year; Unsung Heroes: Thomas Birch, Heather and Lloyd Cary, Rebecca Burkhard, Pilot Club of Belen, Karen

Walker, Charles and JoAnne Montoya and Jim and Lynn Davis.

- 2018: First United Methodist Church of Belen, Citizens of the Year; Unsung Heroes: Morgan Nesslage Bland, Dorie Corrao, The Matanza Misfits, Tom and Betty Moore, Rustin Porter, Russel and Linda Orr and Marie Varela

- 2019: Kelly Cross, Citizen of the Year; Unsung Heroes: Jerry Cline, Eric Green, Daniel Kloeppel, Christopher Martinez, Jim Sloan, Spencer Wood and Rob Sexmith and Silvia Trujillo.

- 2020: St. Teresa of Calcutta Soup Kitchen, Citizens of the Year; Frank Chacon, Sarah Gillen, Lincoln Hill, Valencia County First Responders, Belen Public Health and Valencia County's essential workers.

- 2021: Deborah Baca, Jacqueline Kelly-Romero and Tia Montoya, Citizens of the Year; Unsung Heroes: Mary Hahn, Bart Regelbrugge, Hollie Riggan, Rosa Sisneros and Merita Wilson.

- 2022: Holly Noelle Chavez, Citizen of the Year; Unsung Heroes: Jessica Chavez, Gary Jacobson, Keller family, Gwen Mosimann, Jocelyn and Chris Padilla Hunter, and Clair Toledo.

- 2023: Tia Jones, Citizen of the Year; Unsung Heroes: Ginny Adame, Mary Atencio, Friends of El Cerro, Alfredo Gomez, Jo'l Moore, and Pat Poole

- 2024: Betty Follett, Citizen of the Year; Unsung Heroes: Jean Davis, Lee Matthews, Phillip Montano, Sallie Rizzo, Angela Sparks and Charity Wilson.

- 2025: Liz Marquez, Citizen of the Year; Unsung Heroes: Friends of the Belen Public Library; Barbara Bradley-Buttram, Steve Togami, Amy Torres, Manny and Marcelle Trujillo and the Valencia County Resource Center volunteers.



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