

Thomas Buckley, Chief Financial Officer; Lisa O'Brien, Foundation Director; Traci Chavez McAdams, Director of Philanthropic Services.

## Taos Community Foundation: A junction for people, resources, and ideas

By Andy Dennison

Taos County is home to more than 200 nonprofit organizations that strive to fill innumerable unmet needs in this community. Deciding which nonprofit or cause to support can be a daunting task for an individual, business or family wanting to help.

That's where Taos Community Foundation steps in.

For the past 18 years, the foundation has been the "platform for giving" in Northern New Mexico. Founded in 1998, Taos Community Foundation has grown to \$9 million in assets under management and annually granting upwards of a million dollars in community support.

As one of 750 nationally accredited community foundations, the Taos organization primarily serves Taos County and western Colfax County. As such, the foundation fills the roles of public charity, philanthropic advisor and grant-maker so that donations get to where they make the most impact.

In the 2015-16 fiscal year, the Foundation issued \$745,000 in grants in seven "giving pathways": Basic Needs, Education, Youth, Health, Environment, Creativity and Culture, and Community Advocacy. Since July 2016, the foundation has received more

than \$1.2 million in new contributions

Gifts come through donations of cash, financial assets, stocks and securities, bequests from estates, life insurance policies, retirement accounts, donations of property and more. These assets are pooled into "charitable funds" that are invested to produce annual income.

"Let us take on the financial work," said Foundation Director Lisa O'Brien during a recent interview at the foundation's downtown office. "We have the financial expertise and experience. That's what we do best."

Over time, the philanthropic portfolio pays to fund grants and scholarships in many charitable directions. The foundation's staff does not select the grant recipients; rather, there are dozens of volunteers who serve on advisory committees, who then share recommendations to donor advisors or the foundation's board of directors. All grants extended have been vetted through a due diligence process to assure that the grantee is in good standing and that grant outcomes will be reported back to the donor.

Whether someone wants to support a particular nonprofit, or a specific community issue, Taos Community Foundation does the work "on the ground" to get those funds to where they will make the greatest impact, often giving the donor the biggest bang for their buck.

"We spend much of our time and energy making sure we provide great donor services," O'Brien said, noting that each donation—regardless of size—gets the foundation's full attention. "There's a myth out there that we are out raising money for the

causes we want to support. But the truth is, we are stewards for our donors' funds. We do the research on giving opportunities, we track trends in the community and then we link donors with what is most important to them. We want people to be excited about their philanthropy!"

The foundation considers itself a "junction for people, resources and ideas," she said.

"We don't want to compete with nonprofits, so we are careful in our fundraising efforts," said O'Brien, who took over as director in late September. "We are better poised to help secure funds and assets with an eye on the long term."

For example, one giving pathway is education. The Garcia Family Scholarship Fund, set up by a Taos family in 2010, left the family's estate with Taos Community Foundation and earmarked it all for local scholarships.

"The Garcia family's partnership with the foundation made it possible for their legacy gift to really make a difference — their gift will be here for decades, continuing to support youth in obtaining a college degree," O'Brien noted.

Foundation staff members always keep their ears to the ground to recognize how the

needs in the Taos community are changing and how the foundation may best respond.

"Much of our work is asking, "Where are the gaps?" and strategizing for the future. We often help form partnerships that will sustain in the future," said O'Brien.

For instance, years ago a community member overheard a conversation at a pharmacy with a woman who had difficulty paying for a needed prescription. This committed donor made a gift to the foundation that started the Emergency Medicines Fund. Fifteen years later, that fund has shifted to provide more services in basic needs: "The need in the community changed and our grant-making responded to that need."

In the end, Taos Community Foundation strives to create stability for nonprofits and individuals in need so as to build a stronger community as whole.

"Philanthropy is a leap of faith, that's for sure," said O'Brien. "But we believe that with the work that we do, continually asking questions and, at times, taking thoughtful risks, good things will happen.

"And, ultimately, our community will be stronger," she said.

