

S U C C E S S S T O R I E S

TAOS COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

Leading in a time of crisis



BY LISA O'BRIEN

For the past 22 years, Taos Community Foundation has been the “platform for giving” in Northern New Mexico.

Founded in 1998, the foundation has grown to over \$12 million in assets under management and annually grants over a million dollars in community support.

As one of over 500 nationally accredited community foundations, the Taos organization serves Taos and western Colfax counties. As such, the foundation fills the roles of public charity, philanthropic adviser and community grant-maker ensuring that charitable gifts get to where they make impact.

Taos Community Foundation entered the calendar year with some lofty plans – all growth goals that would further anchor the organization into its third decade of serving the needs of community. Plans included a new online portal that would create greater efficiencies and offer streamlined services for charitable fundholders; launch of a nonprofit educational and nontraditional scholarship program; and preparation for a formal strategic planning process with an expanding board of directors.

Then COVID-19 came into our world and, like all sectors of community, work at the foundation came to a screeching halt.

Under the leadership of foundation director Lisa O'Brien, Taos Community Foundation moved staff quickly to working remotely from home and began framing out how to best address the needs of community. “It was an avalanche of tasks,”

stated O'Brien, “we were trying to figure out new operational policies, while at the same time trying to manage the flood of calls requesting assistance.

“It was clear we were in uncharted waters and yet we knew we had a role to play in response,” O'Brien reflected.

Focus of the entire organization shifted into emergency response that included moving unrestricted dollars toward a newly formed emergency action fund – The Fund for Taos – and eliminating many of the administrative steps for grantees.

George Jaramillo, chair of the foundation's board, shared, “This was a moment of pivot for us as an organization and we put as much of our attention and resources forward as quickly as we could.”

Those efforts have been significant.

To date, nearly \$600,000 has been raised for The Fund for Taos, an emergency action fund that was established shortly after Governor Lujan-Grisham declared the state of emergency. “We know that we are in this for the long haul,” stated O'Brien, adding, “and we have the responsibility to steward these charitable gifts in a smart and strategic way.”

Outreach director Helen Forte noted, “We are ready to move into this new recovery work,” which includes a soon-to-be-announced competitive application for nonprofit organizations. “We are outlining a process that will support longer-term resiliency efforts, while also continuing to assess the emergency needs of nonprofits providing support to our most vulnerable individuals and families,” she added.

Taos Community Foundation has entered into a new position of leadership in community – one that clearly outlines a path of stability and presence.

“Leadership is both a function and a process,” said O'Brien. “Taos Community Foundation has stepped up to the plate in regards to COVID-19 and the impact on our community. I am proud that we have been thoughtful and responsive in our efforts.”

As a founding partner of the Enchanted Circle-Community Organizations Active in Disaster, Luis Reyes, CEO of Kit Carson Electric, remarked, “Seeing how the foundation really cares about our community and helping people get through this pandemic in a cooperative way has demonstrated how valuable Taos Community Foundation is to our community. With the support of the foundation we can meet the challenges that face us in the future,” said Reyes.

“The EC-COAD formation has been a game changer for community work,” stated O'Brien, also a co-founder of the group. “We've been able to work through system quagmires very quickly as a team, while also identifying areas where charitable dollars were needed quickly,” she added.

“COVID-19 has pushed us as an organization,” said O'Brien. “Just as we thought we had a plan moving forward, the landscape changed, and we were pressed to reflect and change course. Community response efforts are not always easy or tidy. How we stop, assess and move forward must be a thoughtful process,” she added.

Also in response to COVID-19, the foundation's partnership with the New Mexico Coalition of Community Foundations has blossomed. The All Together New Mexico Fund, launched in partnership with the governor's office, has pushed over \$2 million in grants across the state. “This coalition partnership has leveraged

nearly \$100,000 in our northern communities,” shared Traci Chavez McAdams, director of philanthropic services at Taos Community Foundation.

Taos Community Foundation is an anchor organization in our community that has demonstrated strong financial stewardship of charitable assets, the ability to respond to emerging community needs as they are identified and the drive to push itself as an organization to move into future.

“Now that things have somewhat settled on the emergency response side, we are getting back to our ‘regular work,’ while continuing to work remotely,” O'Brien stated. “In spite of COVID-19, we continue to open new charitable funds and engage in legacy gift conversations. I believe our leadership and granting response in the past three months have been recognized and donors know we are trusted partners in community.”

The foundation has signed the New Mexico Safe Promise pledge and encourages other nonprofits and businesses to do the same. “We are all in this together – and continuing to follow COVID-safe practices is essential for our community,” noted O'Brien. “The foundation is here for the long term and we are committed to working with and for our community as we recover and grow in strength together.”

For more information about Taos Community Foundation, go to taoscf.org.

THE FUND FOR TAOS



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