



local flavor

OCTOBER
2019

SANTA FE
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TAOS

A TASTE OF LIFE IN NEW MEXICO

**FLYING
STAR**

Nob Hill's
Trailblazer

**TRAIL TO
TEN 3** Hike it Like a Local



CAPTURING BALLOON FIESTA

story by
CULLEN CURTISS
photos by
GABRIELLA MARKS



NEW KID ON THE BLOCK



If you were fortunate to grow up in a neighborhood, you might agree that the collection of streets and intersections, of stoops and sidewalks, of hoops and hopscotch is where it all begins, your sense of place and belonging. My husband's childhood Garcia Street neighborhood has changed a bit from the 1960s and '70s, but that doesn't take away from the fact that he took his first steps there, in the only house his parents could afford. That he used to buy his mother cigarettes from Tito's Food Line on the corner. That dogs and kids ran free over adobe walls and through the streets. It doesn't matter what it is now, only what it was. It was his neighborhood and it shaped him.

As it celebrates a decade, New Mexico School for the Arts is so very pleased to have established their permanent home in the neighborhood where it belongs.

Co-founder of NMSA with Cindy Montoya, Catherine Oppenheimer nods Yes when I ask if she had her sights on the Sanbusco Market Center before it was even for sale. "When Borders left, the writing was on the wall," she says as she opens the door to the yet-to-be-mirrored dance studio. She removes her shoes, and bounces in first position, ever the ballet dancer, and questions hard-hatted Nicholas, "This is sprung, right?"

We move through the remainder of the dance and theater space that was once Cost Plus World Market. There is so much light, a critical design element of the entire school. Walls glide to create separate spaces over a vast sprung floor that will be the one area able to accommodate the entire school, which now educates 250 students and promises 400. "We made an offer when Sanbusco first went into bankruptcy, and they laughed at us!"



"At the end of the day, all parents want is for their children to be safe and supported, and that's all that students want as well. This is where our cultural values begin."

-Cindy Montoya, NMSA co-founder and president





NEW KID ON THE BLOCK

“Now with this physical plant, this will be New Mexico’s school.”
 –Catherine Oppenheimer,
 NMSA co-founder



Over the next few years, that team, including architects, contractors and lawyers investigated many other potential sites— St. Catherine’s Indian School, a building near the Department of Transportation, the College of Santa Fe, the Scottish Rite Center. “We figured out a way to make all of them work, but this was by far the best,” Oppenheimer says, opening the door to the Paseo, the former Sanbusco thoroughfare connecting all retail stores, and originally, a drive-through for lumber pick-up at the Santa Fe Builders Supply Co. The generous walkway allows a large circle of black-T-shirt-clad theater students to improv, hurrying cello-and guitar-bearing musicians to get to practice, and friends in quadruple to skip hand-in-hand. The former storefronts’ glass walls extend the footprint of each classroom, and convey a message of transparency and flexibility (most classrooms flip from an a.m. academic focus to a p.m. arts focus).

“After three years, they were putting [Sanbusco] on auction.com, and we decided to go for it,” Oppenheimer smiles. “It’s one thing to say, in theory, that we need a permanent building for our school. It’s another thing to raise \$30 million.”

And yet they did, and the school is owned, debt free. “Now with this physical plant, this will be New Mexico’s school,” she says. “That, plus a great culture and a great track record, I do not have any qualms about the school continuing on a path to success.” That path is trussed with a mix of critical elements: to name a few, location, culture and resources (the academic program is funded through the state charter by the state of New Mexico; the private sector and foundations support the arts, the outreach and the residential component).

Oppenheimer (who was also NDI-New Mexico’s co-founder) had experience scoping out neighborhoods. She recalls the early days of sweeping up needles and broken vials from the parking lot of NDI’s permanent Santa Fe home at the Dance Barns, and similar situations at the Albuquerque Hiland location. “But these schools change neighborhoods,” she says. “They create a lot of traffic—people, ideas, movement.”



Sean Johnson, Mesa Creative Solutions

NMSA co-founders Catherine Oppenheimer and Cindy Montoya





As Oppenheimer envisioned, NMSA buzzes in the Santa Fe Railyard district, just steps from the Rail Runner's terminus and bus line connections, delivering students from all points. "It's part of the cultural life of the city, embedded in the heart near museums." Not your typical new-kid-on-the-block-who-has-trouble-fitting-in, NMSA had been building strong partnerships with its now-neighbors (and several other local arts organizations) for years, those being SITE Santa Fe, form & concept gallery, Warehouse 21, Jean Cocteau Cinema/Stagecoach Foundation, Violet Crown. These and others offer indisputable proof that art is important to people, meaningful to Santa Fe and its visitors, and that cultivating a child's creativity and passion gives them a chance at a future as an artist.

Director of Communications Sean Johnson says, "Our arrival here is meteoric for the area. We can be an anchor in this community." Johnson's use of the term anchor comes with confidence. In the years spent building a case for a statewide arts school in Santa Fe, Oppenheimer and her founding team visited a wide variety of publicly funded statewide residential art schools in Alabama, Mississippi, California, Minnesota and North Carolina, and two private schools—Idyllwild Arts Academy and Interlochen Center for the Arts—and what they saw buoyed them. "North Carolina School for the Arts was built in the middle of the state, in the country, and a city has grown up around it in 75 years," says Oppenheimer. "This model works."

And the time seems right. The University of New Mexico Bureau of Business & Economic Research published

a report in 2014 titled, "Building on the Past, Facing the Future: Renewing the Creative Economy of New Mexico", in which it wrote: "Cities, states and nations across the world are embracing arts and culture, and creative industries generally as a foundation for the development of a 21st century economy. With a genuinely unique history, a creatively engaged population and a strong national and global reputation, New Mexico is well positioned to succeed in the development of its own creative economy."

Also in the report, one of the five noted challenges reads: "Development of a workforce for creative industries, including creation of employment and training opportunities for individuals entering the field and the retention of skilled professionals." Similar findings nearly 15 years ago lit a fire under Oppenheimer when NMSA was just an idea some NDI parents shared. "They came into my office and said, 'Can't NDI start a school? We'll help you. The academics and the dancing can be combined.'"

"And then I sat next to Stuart Ashman when he was Cabinet Secretary of the New Mexico Department of Cultural Affairs, and he said, 'The truth is that New Mexico is increasingly importing its artists and middle and senior managers in the arts. We are known for our arts and culture and yet we are not nurturing and developing our own youth to participate.'"

The fire was set aflame. Oppenheimer ran with the idea brought to her by the NDI moms, one of whom was co-founder and current president Cindy Montoya, whose 10-year-old daughter, now a professional dancer with Stephen Petronio's company in New York, was Oppenheimer's student. Serious and committed students like Montoya's daughter spent 20-25 hours a week at NDI, and then traveled home to all points north to tackle homework and chores, and to eat dinner.

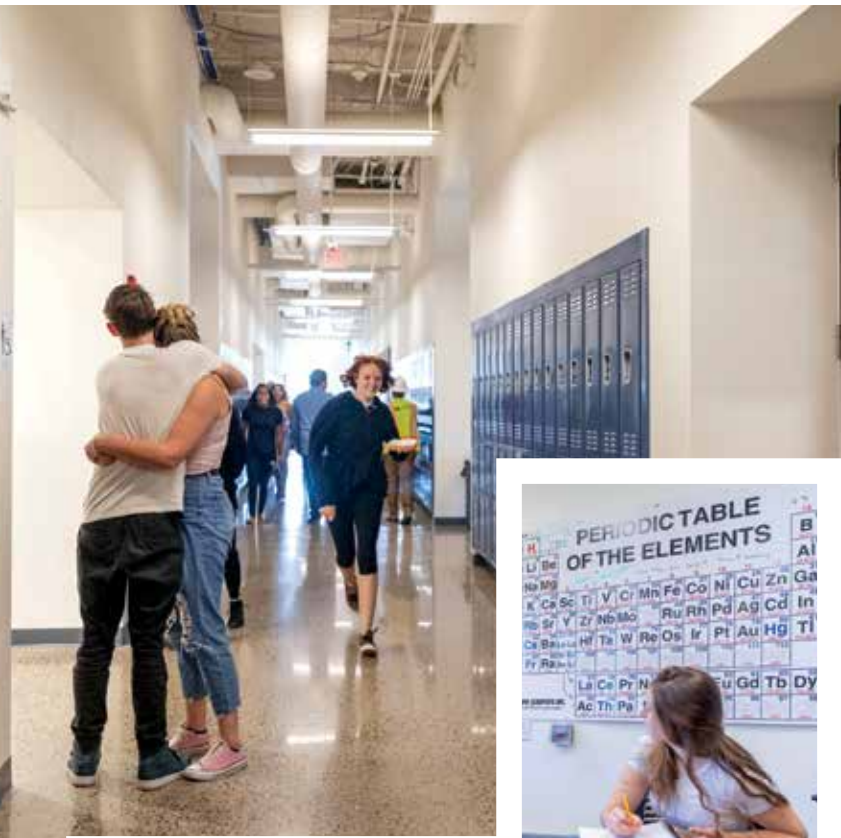
As we walk past the soundproof practice rooms, Oppenheimer says, "Cindy built the school—the culture and community, the data and assessments, the mindfulness. It is reflective of who she is in the world—deeply kind, caring, gracious, funny, with a never-give-up attitude. She's created a culture like that."

While obtaining her master's degree in education with a focus on English-language learners and at-risk students at the College of Santa Fe, Montoya became even more sensitive to the different kinds of kids that make up a classroom. She says, "At the end of the day, all parents want is for their children to be safe and supported, and that's all that students want as well. This is where our cultural values begin."





NEW KID ON THE BLOCK



We stop at the intersection of lockers and each say hello to someone as students jostle past and teachers weave and smile. It feels like a bottleneck. NMSA's former home at St. Francis Cathedral School was approximately 32,000 square feet, and its current home will be more than double that once the money and the phased plans of dorm, cafeteria and performing arts center align. Oppenheimer says, "Part of our culture was built on being on top of everyone, and the artistic collisions and creativity. Now, music has its wing, dance has its, etc. So we were conscious to put all of the lockers in this space so there has to be a collision."

And conscious with everything else, it would seem. Teachers and students were consulted in the programming-inspired architectural and design decisions. What do you need in order to teach and learn well? (One peek at the science lab, and it's clear that a science teacher was asked for input.) The school practices a "non-punitive" approach to academics, based on the concept of learning in the arts, which is always reiterative. Oppenheimer says, "Any kind of artist expects to do another rendition, and get lots of critiques. We start where you are. We take the shame away. We help you reiterate and get a deeper understanding." This approach is ideal for a great number of NMSA's students who hail from 67 communities/pueblos in 15 counties and many of whom enter behind grade level. Montoya says of the ultimate goal, "Everyone can grow, but this is how you close that gap."

Another gap-closing methodology "to make things obvious and transparent," according to Montoya, are the grade-level academic seminars. Students can get help with a range of issues—executive function, social-emotional, time management, exam preparation, academic aptitude. Oppenheimer says, "Early on, we realized we were asking artists to be open and create, and this brought up a lot of challenges."

Students are encouraged to intentionally explore their personal identity and cultural history to emphasize that "we value different perspectives. We learn from our unique dimensions of race, gender, family and home," Montoya says. "We all have something to learn." I read a quotation from a student: "If I hadn't come here, I would have given up on my passion."

Oppenheimer and Montoya nod—they say that sentiment represents most of the kids. "Part is passion and access to lessons, but mostly, they found their people. It's about belonging. They are the common culture here," Oppenheimer says.

With the location right and the culture working, a 98-percent graduation rate and 95-percent college acceptance rate, the next steps are to just plain fly. Certainly the City will be flying as a result: an economic impact analysis conducted in 2016 found that NMSA's recurring contribution to the City over the next 10 years in their Railyard neighborhood is estimated to be \$8 million annually.

Of course, there's still quite a bit of money to raise to launch the subsequent phases. And that committee is the only one Oppenheimer still chairs, which is meaningful for a person who has been chair of every NMSA committee. "It's time to step back," she says.

But her last words make me wonder if she will or if she can. "I am in the midst of a culture that is inspiring. It gives your life purpose and meaning. I was there for the kid who wouldn't move, who slumped and dragged his feet and then all of sudden busted out and let their body have space."

Regardless, Montoya will be there. "Having the opportunity to lead NMSA has been the golden ticket," she says. If you've not already, you'll see those NMSA kids walking around in their new neighborhood someday soon, where they are happy to belong.



To learn more about the New Mexico School for the Arts go to nmschoolforthearts.org.

STORE HOURS Wed - Sat: 10:30 am to 5:30 pm
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Mon & Tues: Closed

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If I want to know what's happening on the foodie scene, I always go to Local Flavor.

— Jennifer Lea Kimball, La Fonda, owner, Chairwoman of the Board



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