

local flavor

A TASTE OF LIFE IN NEW MEXICO

NOVEMBER
2019

Cowgirl

CHEF PATRICK LAMBERT

CHANGE MAKERS

Young River Stewards
Wildlife Corridors
Searchlight NM
Taos Ski Valley

SANTA FE
ALBUQUERQUE
TAOS

The Truth Tellers

story by **CULLEN CURTISS**
photos by **DON USNER**

We may rank favorably in the category of air quality, but in the area of child well-being, New Mexico is dead last, 50th. And not just in 2019, but in 2018 and in 2013. This is according to data published in the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Kids Count Data Book, which, for the last 30 years, has ranked all 50 states in the domains of child economic well-being, education, health, and family and community. The details are stark. And yet, there is a team of people doing what they do best that views the grim stat as galvanizing. "We want to shine a light on aspects of New Mexico that need illumination," says author William deBuys, board chair of Searchlight New Mexico, a "non-partisan, nonprofit news organization dedicated to investigative and public service journalism in the interest of the people of New Mexico," according to Searchlight's website. It was founded in 2018.

Led initially by Ray Rivera, former editor of the *Santa Fe New Mexican*, the high-impact investigative reporting body was forged to report deeply on issues related to child well-being in a timely, strategic fashion.

According to deBuys, it became clear that, "if the coverage were timed to raise child well-being as an issue in the 2018 political cycle, it might produce real gains for children and their families in the 2019 legislature and in the policies and administration of the new incoming governor."

Searchlight Editor Sara Solovitch says, "There's very little when you start to think about it that doesn't have to do with children." As well as an editor, Solovitch is an author and veteran journalist of a variety of publications, including the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, where she was a staff reporter for six years, and the *San Jose Mercury News*, where she wrote a weekly column on children's health. Solovitch moved to Santa Fe from the San Francisco Bay Area to help launch the nonprofit, which publishes its investigative pieces online at searchlightnm.org, and through 40 partners, where they are localized, if need be.

Solovitch's words introduce the bound selection of Searchlight's most insidious stories from 2018, a volume titled "Raising New Mexico" designed as a face-the-hard-facts gift for each legislator in the 2019 session, with the idea that "the quality of a society should be judged by how it treats its children." She writes, "Through the prism of child well-being, we are able to examine the environment, access to water, climate change,

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—Rob Dean

immigration, education, the opioid epidemic, healthcare, infrastructure and business. By concentrating our gaze on child well-being, we are reporting on the present and the future of New Mexico itself."

To read the periodical's collection of Searchlight New Mexico's 2018 coverage is to feel despondent. Stories like the following four are common:

A judge declares the state's public education system violated "students' rights under the constitution to a sufficient education."

We have not only "one of the highest 'polypharmacy' rates in the nation, but also 'one of the highest rates of 'out-migration' anywhere in the country" due to a lack of job opportunity.

Grandparents are caring for their grandchildren at "more than three times the national average in some opioid-ravaged counties."

And yet reporting on the state of the state is what news organizations do, and they remain undeterred. "Doing journalism is an act of faith—faith that if we can inform people, well-informed people activate policy makers to make reform, make progress in our society," says Rob Dean, Searchlight New Mexico executive director and former *Santa Fe New Mexican* editor for 22 years.

Dean says he was happily retired before the job opportunity with Searchlight emerged, but he'd been watching a few phenomena conflating toward the combustion of the democratic institution we know as the press. "There was the recession that contributed to the collapse of an economic model for traditional media, then the digital revolution. And then, along comes the election of 2016. And I could see the consequences of a disorganized, chaotic media, and how that can be a threat to democracy."

Of note is that this "nonprofit journalism experiment" of which Searchlight New Mexico is a part is only about 10 or 12 years old, but Dean says it's grown to approximately 250 organizations throughout the U.S. "I love the fact that people across the country are thinking of a way to preserve this cornerstone of democracy. Our goal is to be a guardian of democracy. We give ourselves a fighting chance with a public interest mission. There is a clarity of purpose that's really quite fulfilling."

Searchlight's photographer, Embudo-born Don Usner, who has contributed writing and images to a number of published books, says he's also fulfilled. "I am always looking for the opportunity to take pictures that have a connection to a social cause," he says. Usner's interest was shaped years ago, when he photographed children on behalf of Las Cumbres Community Services in Española, where his wife created programs. "It got me into [understanding] childhood in New Mexico and some of the issues," Usner says, and Solovitch echoes her colleague's passions: "Changing the world through journalism is everything I believe in."

And Searchlight is changing the world, at least here in New Mexico. Dean says, "We feel we have made a lot of progress through state-wide investigations and policy changes in the state. We think we have influenced legislators and the election and where the state is going for education and child welfare. And we have won some awards."





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Dean and Solovitch go on to recount some impact highlights. Published in August 2019, a story titled “A Chill in the Air” by Nick Pachelli about teen suicide was built on the narrative of an Albuquerque mom and her Eldorado High School daughter. “It went viral among teenagers,” Dean says. Tragically, there were two subsequent suicides at the

high school. “The students rose up and used the story as a demand for change,” he says. In an update, Pachelli writes, “At a board meeting, students asked for peer-to-peer programs, different prevention programming, and licensed in-school therapists to help counter what they called a ‘mental health crisis.’” The story was published nationally, in *High Country News*, *Las Cruces Sun-News* and in *The Trace*, a news organization focused on gun violence.

In February of this year, investigative journalist Amy Linn published a piece titled “Till the Cows Come Home” (with a July 19 progress report by April Reese) about a Clovis dairy farmer’s plight with known groundwater contaminants called PFAS from Cannon Air Force Base that poisoned his livelihood and endangered his life. Part of a cascade of coverage, this story and others led to change. “We are aware that the attorney general sued the Fed for lack of action,” Dean says.

A year ago, Amy Linn revealed that New Mexico was not monitoring prescriptions for children in state custody. A progress report published by Ike Swedlitz in July 2019 reports, “Children Youth and Families Division worked with New Mexico Senator Bill Tallman (D-Bernalillo) in the last legislative session on a bill to provide for stricter regulations in the prescribing practices to foster children.” Though the bill failed, “The new Secretary of Children Youth and Families Division decided to take [aspects of it] on administratively, and he put in place a monitory and regulatory network to keep the kids safe,” Dean says.

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And finally, in October of this year, Ed Williams published the story “Restraint, Seclusion, Deception,” the result of a 10-month-long investigation about the frequent use of physical restraint and seclusion on special education students as young as six years old in Albuquerque Public Schools. Searchlight hosted a free public forum titled “Beyond Punishment” to discuss alternatives at the University of New Mexico School of Law. “Judging by the large crowd [of 200], those revelations touched a lot of people and activated reformers,” wrote Dean, encapsulating the event for his board of directors. Speakers included clinical child psychologist and author of *Lost at School*, Ross Greene, Sergio Pareja, the law school’s dean, as well as a parent, teacher and a deputy education secretary.

Reflecting on the event, Dean says, “It has particular definition because of our public interest mission. We do not have a printing press, we do not have a broadcast signal, we rely on publishing/broadcast partners. We rely on the public to try and engage, and this is an example of taking our work directly to the public. And it’s an interchange. The reading public hears from us, goes behind the curtain with us and we listen to them.”

To learn more about Searchlight New Mexico, to read their investigative stories, or to donate, visit searchlightnm.org.



- A, F From “A Chill in the Air”
- B From “Till the Cows Come Home”
- C, G From “The Price of Oil”
- D From “Hopewell Mann”
- E From “Restraint, Seclusion, Delusion”

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