IN MEMORIAM: ROB DEAN 1954–2020

ROB DEAN was an ardent journalist and a gentleman, in a business that doesn’t always favor gentlemen. His job title at Searchlight New Mexico was executive director, but in truth he was our captain.

When he died suddenly on January 5, our world shifted.

Rob was a big bear of a man who radiated instant warmth, putting people at ease and making them feel recognized. He genuinely cared about other people and they knew it; he was the guy you actually hoped to run into at the water cooler.

A clear and creative thinker, he could pinpoint a problem and distill a solution in record time. He had an uncanny ability to cut to the chase and express himself with precision. It was a gift, looking back, that bore a relationship to his deep knowledge of military history.

Twelve years ago, Rob went back to school and earned a master’s degree from Norwich University, a private military college in Vermont.

Why military history? The reason, as he told his wife, Toni, was because he figured you had to study war to help prevent it. The national political scene distressed him greatly. Journalism, he believed, was a bulwark against the erosion of democracy.

He became our executive director in May 2018, one week before we lost major funding from a foundation we had relied on for ongoing support. Our future suddenly looked dire, and Searchlight was faced with the prospect of laying off our tiny staff and closing our doors.

Rob was instrumental in righting the course. His time here was consumed with raising money and keeping us afloat. He accomplished that goal splendidly. Thanks to him, we are now on solid ground, prepared to push forward with our mission to create high-impact investigative journalism focused on issues of local, regional and national interest.

But he will be remembered for so much more. He was unfailingly kind, generous, gracious and open-hearted. These words are clichés, but in Rob Dean’s case, they are the words that come to the lips of all who knew him.
PICTURING THE ROAD AHEAD

WHAT IS IT ABOUT NEW MEXICO THAT IS SO EXQUISITELY TIMELESS AND YET SO MADDENINGLY RESISTANT TO CHANGE?

SINCE LAUNCHING TWO YEARS AGO, Searchlight New Mexico has forged a different path. We set out to produce high-impact investigative journalism and then chose to focus our attention on issues affecting children and families—not the typical political corruption stories that most investigative journalists regard as their bread and butter.

We sought out funding from private philanthropists and public foundations—and then gave our work away to every newspaper and news outlet that was willing to carry it.

This past year we did something even more unusual. We organized an art exhibit, a historic retrospective of photographs of New Mexican children dating back to the 1980s. Again, not something you’d expect from an investigative journalism organization.

As soon as we assembled the photograph collection, we were confronted by an eerie sensation. What is it about New Mexico that is so exquisitely timeless and yet so maddeningly resistant to change?

The eyes of the children staring out from these pages say that it has always been so. And yet that needn’t be the case. Searchlight’s mandate is to shine a light into the recesses of government abuse and negligence, to confront racial and economic inequities, and to tell compelling stories that elicit real change.

With that in mind, we have done something different this year’s magazine. We added an editor’s note to almost every story, and in this note we asked ourselves: What did this piece actually accomplish? Did it lead to systemic change? Did it create accountability? Or was it simply an exercise in futility?

We ask these tough questions because without impact, an investigative news organization like Searchlight has little reason to exist. Our stories have triggered state investigations, inspired legislative action, and sparked massive changes in some of New Mexico’s most unwieldy bureaucracies. One of our investigations led to the closing of the state’s largest foster care agency. Another preceded the suspension of the Quenita School Board by the Public Education Department. A month after our story about the contamination of groundwater in the heart of eastern New Mexico’s dairy land, the New Mexico Environment Department. A month after our story about the contamination of groundwater in the heart of eastern New Mexico’s dairy land, the New Mexico Environment Department.

See for yourself. The photos at the centerpiece of this exhibit at the Historic Santa Fe Foundation. Almost all our stories have stimulated public dialogue and influenced statewide elections.

You can read them in full on our website (searchlightnm.org), though many readers consume them in New Mexico’s newspapers and media outlets—without ever recognizing them as Searchlight’s. That’s because we partner with almost every news outlet in the state, providing them with what amounts to an investigative team they otherwise could not afford in this era of shriveled media resources.

Our stories and photographs are increasingly published across the nation and, indeed, the world—bringing New Mexico’s concerns to readers of The Guardian, The Marshall Project and Der Spiegel. In only two years, our work has received several national awards, and we are deeply honored.

Of course, the real honor is in telling stories that lead to substantive change for New Mexicans. If nothing else, we hope the next generation of children will meet the camera with a different expectation in their eyes.
CONTRIBUTORS

SARA SOLOVITCH is the executive editor of Searchlight New Mexico. Her investigative and long-form stories have been published in Esquire, Wired, Politico, and The Washington Post. As a staff reporter at the Philadelphia Inquirer, she covered education, courts and special projects. A former health columnist for the San Jose Mercury News, Solovitch traveled throughout New Mexico and Alaska while reporting for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation on health care in underserved areas. Her book Playing Scared: A History and Memoir of Stage Fright was published by Bloomsbury in 2015.

ED WILLIAMS has reported on poverty, public health and the environment in the U.S. and Latin America for digital, print and radio media outlets since 2005. He came to Searchlight by way of KUNM Public Radio in Albuquerque, where he worked as a reporter covering public health. Ed’s work has appeared in the Austin American-Statesman, NPR, Columbia Journalism Review, and other publications. He earned a master’s in journalism from the University of Texas at Austin in 2010.

IKE SWETLITZ has traveled the world to hold policymakers, businesses, and scientists accountable. He focuses on criminal justice, and also writes about education and health care. Before coming to Searchlight, he covered health and medical science at STAT in Boston and Washington, D.C. Ike graduated from Yale with a degree in physics and is based in Albuquerque.

APRIL REESE has covered the environment and science in the Southwest for 12 years. Before joining Searchlight in April 2019, she freelanced for various magazines and news outlets, including Popular Science, Outside, The Guardian, and Scientific American. She’s a Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting grantee and has been an editor at Discover magazine and Cosmos in Australia. She also once worked as E&E’s Southwest reporter and as a producer at Radio High Country News. Rease has a master’s degree in environmental studies from the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies.

WILLIAM DEBYS is the author of nine books, including The Last Unicorn: A Search for One of Earth’s Rarest Creatures (listed by the Christian Science Monitor as one of the 10 best nonfiction books of 2015), A Great Aridness: Climate Change and the Future of the American West (2011), The Work (2008), Salt Dreams (1999, which inspired the 2017 movie, The Colorado), and River of Traps (a 1991 Pulitzer finalist). In 2015 his book, Enchantment and Exploitation (1985), was reissued in a revised and expanded 30th-anniversary edition. He was a 2008-2009 Guggenheim Fellow.

DON J. USNER was born in Embudo, New Mexico, and has written and provided photos for several books, including The Natural History of Big Sur: Sabino’s Map: Life in Chimayó’s Old Plaza; Benigna’s Chimayo: Cuentos from the Old Plaza; Valles Caldera: A Vision for New Mexico’s National Preserve (also a winner of a Southwest Book Award); and Chasing Dichos through Chimayó (finalist for a 2015 New Mexico-Arizona Book Award). Don contributed a chapter and photographs to The Plazas of New Mexico (also a winner of Southwest Book Award), and writes for periodicals as well. His photographs were featured in the photography journal Lenswork and in an online blog of The New Yorker.

CHRISTIAN MARQUEZ was born and raised in the Land of Enchantment and has spent his career thus far exploring the stories of the people who call it home. Christian was accepted into the Dow Jones News Fund internship program and started as an intern at Searchlight in 2018. His past work has focused on the issues of health care access, housing security and homelessness, but also economic development and job growth. He is a graduate of the University of New Mexico and is based in Albuquerque and Santa Fe.

Born and raised in Albuquerque, NICK PACHELLI has reported on health, crime, and justice for a mix of print and digital publications. In 2019, he was a finalist for the Livingston Award, an award honoring the best storytelling by journalists under the age of 35 across all forms of journalism. Nick’s work has appeared in The New York Times, Esquire, High Country News, and other outlets. He is a graduate of Loyola Marymount University and received a master’s from Columbia University.

AMY LINN has written about social issues and child well-being throughout her career, starting at the Miami Herald and including work for the Philadelphia Inquirer and Bloomberg News. She was the recipient of a 2015 Alicia Patterson Journalism Fellowship to write about teenagers on death row; the resulting stories appeared in The New York Times, Salon and other publications. Linn has been an editor at Outside Magazine and Wired as well as a freelance for magazines, both digital and traditional. She is the former editor of the Criminal Justice Project, an investigative reporting unit that covered New Mexico’s troubled justice system.

ADRIA MALCOLM is an independent visual journalist and cinematographer based in Albuquerque. She has contributed to stories for The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, The Atlantic, ProPublica, and more. She focuses on long-term and immersive storytelling that explores substance abuse disorders, incarceration, and socioeconomic disparities. In addition to her work as a visual journalist, she is a guest teaching artist at Working Classroom, a nonprofit after-school program in the Barelas neighborhood of Albuquerque, instructing workshops for middle and high school students from under-represented communities in the arts.

ANTHONY JACKSON is an independent visual journalist based in Albuquerque. He interned at Searchlight as a Dow Jones News Fund fellow where he gathered data, edited and shot video and photos.
DIRE STREETS:

The federal government and its Bureau of Indian Affairs have historically failed to furnish even the most basic infrastructure necessary to operate local schools.

BY AMY LINN AND ALYSA LANDRY | APRIL 2, 2019
PHOTOGRAPHS BY DON J. USNER

Roadways and Broken Promises on the Navajo Nation
SANOSTEE, N.M. — Sharon Begay knows this road by heart. The 43-year-old mother of two has spent a lifetime memorizing the jagged surface and thuggish boulders that define Indian Service Route 5010. Locals just call it “the road” and gauge distances with landmarks: windmills, S-curves, a water tower covered with graffiti that once served as the town’s main source of gossip.

It’s an unpaved byway in the Sanostee Chapter of the Navajo Nation that feeds a network of unnamed dirt roads, serving hundreds of families in the shadows of the Chuska Mountains. Generations of Begay’s family have herded sheep along this road; as a child she traveled it by horseback, alongside her father.

But this road also broke Begay’s heart. On a rainy day in the winter of 2004, her father collapsed in front of the cluster of small, wood-frame homes where she and her extended family still live. The energetic man of 75 had just arrived home from tending the family’s 60-odd head of sheep. He got out of his truck and crumpled to the ground. The rain that day was relentless, the mud impenetrable.

“It took three ambulances to finally get him,” Begay said. “The first ambulance got stuck in the mud, then the second got stuck.” Nearly four hours passed before the third ambulance reached him. He died in the hospital shortly afterward.

“I've always wondered whether he could have lived longer, if the road was better,” Begay said. “I'll wonder that all my life.”

Nearly everyone in the Sanostee Chapter has a story about Indian Service Route 5010, a seven-mile corridor that connects as many as 2,500 residents to the outside world—or denies them access altogether.

“During winter or early spring, life really revolves around the condition of the road,” Sanostee Chapter President Frank Smith said. “People leave early in the morning when the ground is still frozen, and they can’t come home until it’s frozen again.”

Rain or snow transforms the dirt into mud so thick that 15-ton school buses get mired up to their axles. School districts cancel classes.

People can’t get to work or reach the main highway, U.S. 491, to access grocery stores—the nearest of which is 40 miles north.

“Sometimes we have to wait two weeks before we can get out. There are times when nothing works—not the tractor with chains, not the four-wheeler, not shoveling by hand. We just have to wait.” – EMIL BENALLY

The chapter’s Authorized Local Emergency Response Team (ALER T) routinely dispatches volunteers to check on the most vulnerable residents, delivering food, wood and hay for livestock. The mud bogs derail ambulances or delay their arrival for hours or even days. In the worst cases, aid comes by helicopter.

“This has been forever a problem,” said LaVerda Washburn, a member of Sanostee’s Road Committee, a group formed two years ago to address Route 5010. “Every time it rains between November and March, we pray. The road grabs people and doesn’t let go. It has a hold on all of us.”

At about 27,000 square miles, or roughly the size of West Virginia, the Navajo Nation is the country’s largest Indian reservation. It is also one of the most rural pieces of America, spanning parts of three western states and boasting some of the most iconic vistas in the world.

Since time immemorial, the Navajo have laid claim to these stark landscapes, where daily life and survival are intimately tied to the earth, to changing seasons, and to the traditions passed from one generation to the next. Although collective oral histories stretch back thousands of years, most family stories begin in 1868—the year the Navajo signed a treaty with the United States that ended their incarceration at Bosque Redondo and allowed them to return to their ancestral homeland.

In addition to creating a Navajo reservation, the treaty spelled out the responsibilities of the federal government. In exchange for peace and the relinquishment of Navajo claims to land outside the reservation, the government pledged to provide a school house and a teacher for every 30 students.

The promises were essentially worthless. The federal government and its Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) have historically failed to furnish even the most basic infrastructure necessary to operate local schools. Among the most
obvious failures: federal agencies refused to construct roads that would allow children to ride a bus to schools near their home. Instead, they were sent to distant boarding schools that stripped them of their Native language and culture.

A 1969 Congressional report excoriated the BIA for refusing to create basic roadways that would allow Native American families to stay intact and access an education. Not much has changed in the last 50 years. With a population hovering around 400, Sanostee is a tight-knit community where people look out for each other, often driving long distances to check on elderly residents or deliver care packages. Yet one rain storm can cut the population, and 95 percent of its bus routes are dirt.

Amber Kanazbah Crotty, who represents Sanostee on the Navajo Nation Council, called the lack of infrastructure an abuse of human rights and a violation of the federal government’s treaty obligations.

“This systemic negligence has led to lost opportunity, education, economic development and ability for communities to thrive,” she said. “In denying us roads, the federal government has denied us access to basic human rights like education and health care.”

For Cindy Theodore, transportation coordinator for the Central Consolidated School District (CCSD), watching the weather and predicting road conditions is a full-time job. The nearly 3,000-square-mile school district in rural north-west New Mexico serves a predominantly Navajo student population, and 95 percent of its bus routes are dirt.

The district implements a system of “bad weather stops” for as many as 15 days per year. That means school buses don’t travel their full route because of rain, snow or mud — forcing parents to deliver their children to alternate locations, or to keep them home until the roads dry out.

In the last decade, the road crisis in Indian Country has been the topic of at least eight U.S. Senate hearings, during which New Mexico’s Congressional delegation has lambasted the federal government and the BIA for their neglect of tribal transportation systems.

Of the 11,600 miles of road on the Navajo Nation, 9,000 miles are dirt, according to Garret Silversmith, director of the Navajo Division of Transportation.

NDOT operates with a yearly budget of about $60 million, money that comes from the Federal Highway Administration, fuel excise taxes and the tribe’s general operating fund. Of that, more than $5 million per year goes to blading—or grading—unpaved roads. Blading costs $750 per mile, and it lasts only until the next big rain. The $5 million budget covers blading for 15 miles of roads per chapter, per quarter.

“If you add that up, it’s 60 miles per chapter per year,” Silversmith said. “So we can only focus on the highest priority routes. Because blading just smooths the surface, we end up blading the same 15 miles four times every year.”

The cost for permanent improvements is astronomical. According to the most recent estimates, pavement costs $3 million per mile, while cheaper alternatives like double chip seal or gravel cost $250,000 and $250,000 per mile, respectively. Just putting down gravel on all the Navajo Nation’s roads would cost more than $2 billion.

Now nearing 70, Emil Benally and his wife, Jean, are raising their 4-year-old great-grandson on the small farm that has sustained six generations of his family. That farm, nestled deep in a secluded canyon and accessible only by way of a winding, rugged lane, marks one end of Route 5010. Before it washed out years ago, the road connected Sanostee to Toadlena and Two Grey Hills, communities to the south that are known for their historic trading posts. Today, 5010 dead-ends just past Benally’s house, seven miles from the nearest paved road.

“The road has always been difficult,” Benally said. “Sometimes we have to wait two weeks before we can get out. There are times when nothing works—not the tractor with chains, not the four-wheeler, not shoveling by hand. We just have to wait.”

He hopes his great-grandson won’t have to battle for a road all of his life, as so many Navajo have done.

“If you live in a city with paved roads, you can’t even imagine this,” Benally said. “It’s like we’re lost somewhere in the past.”

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“My time on the Navajo Nation left me with lasting friendships and an equally lasting sense of outrage about the conditions I saw: homes without heat, electricity, or clean running water, and mud roads that make life absolutely treacherous. I’m astonished that politicians have the chutzpah to lie every year about how they’ll fix the problems, which never, ever get fixed.”

— AMY LINN
BY APRIL REESE  |  AUGUST 27, 2019  |  PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANTHONY JACKSON

GILA NATIONAL FOREST — In the shadow of a cliff, 15-year-old Nathan spools an arc of fishing line into the Gila River and waits. Tall and watchful, the teen has been quiet for most of the day during this outing, organized by Families and Youth Incorporated (FYI), a Las Cruces non-profit that works with troubled kids.

A little while ago, at a swimming hole downstream, Nathan stood on the bank skipping stones while the other kids whooped and splashed and jumped from depressions in the cliff face into the cool water. He doesn’t know how to swim. Now he stands in the middle of the river, wet sneakers forgotten, watching the water in front of him for any sign of movement. Finally, a tug. He reels a fist-sized fish into the bright August light. For the first time today, he is smiling.

Like the other teenagers on this trip, Nathan has broken society’s rules — all the kids are on probation — and this day on the river is meant to be a kind of therapy as much as a recreational outing. Research suggests that getting out into nature is good for kids’ mental and physical health — possibly even more so for troubled kids — and trip leaders are hoping time on the river will ease those troubles.

Through a local program that steers kids on probation to healthy activities, this group — nine boys and one girl — is here in the water for a day, two hours from home and a world away from their day-to-day lives.

One 15-year-old got expelled from multiple schools for selling weed. Another, Adam, skipped school and left home without permission too many times and has to wear an ankle monitor. Many live lives marked by trauma and poverty; 37 percent of kids in Doña Ana County, which includes Las Cruces, live below the poverty level, compared to 26 percent of children statewide. But here on the river, all of those worries fall away.

“A lot of these kids have never seen any of this stuff,” says Thomas Zubia, one of the FYI guides, during the ride from Las Cruces to the Gila. “There’s a lot of mumbling and grumbling all the way, until they get out there.”

With such a high percentage of kids living in poverty, the state needed a dedicated program to ensure more disadvantaged youth get to enjoy outdoor experiences.
often. “This is the potential of the Outdoor Equity Fund,” says Vasquez, who is also a Las Cruces city councilor. Growing up in Juárez and El Paso, he learned firsthand how transformative spending time in nature can be for a troubled kid.

With such a high percentage of kids living in poverty, the state needed a dedicated program to ensure more disadvantaged children get to enjoy outdoor experiences like this one, says Rep. Angelica Rubio (D-Doña Ana), who co-authored the legislation.

A host of studies show just how much good the outdoors can do. A study led by environmental psychologist Nancy M. Wells of Cornell University found that kids in rural upstate New York—particularly those with high stress levels—showed greater resilience to stress and adversity when they were close to natural areas. Other research suggests that time in nature improves concentration and social skills and eases depression.

“ADD goes down just walking through trees in an urban park, and kids need to move more and of course that’s easier to do outside,” says Richard Louv, who wrote an influential book called Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature Deficit Disorder, about the decline in kids’ outdoor activity in recent decades and the consequences for health and well-being. “It helps creativity, and kids learn more when they’re outdoors.”

Louv acknowledges that for some kids — especially those who have never been exposed to the outdoors — venturing into nature can be off-putting, at least at first. When he and other guides took a group of teenage gang members into the woods near San Diego, “These big guys with tattoos were terrified,” he recalls. Used to the rhythms of the city, the sounds of wind rustling the trees and creatures scurrying across the forest floor were entirely foreign to them. But it didn’t take long for them to embrace their new environment. “By the end of the day they were 8-year-olds jumping over a creek.”

Before the group hikes back to the vans, Zubia takes a last look at the kids playing in the water. Whoops and laughter echo against the cliff face. “You saw them at the beginning,” he says, watching them from the riverbank. “They were like, ‘No, I don’t want to do this.’ Now look at them.”
The U.S. is unique among nations for its focus on incarceration, locking away just over 2 million adults in prisons and jails—more than any other country.

Gamble is one of about three dozen New Mexicans currently incarcerated for 30 years or more for crimes they committed under the age of 18, according to a Searchlight review.

New Mexico’s laws are relatively lenient, there are at least 87 men and women currently incarcerated in adult prisons with sentences of 10 years or more for crimes they committed as children.

While New Mexico’s laws are relatively lenient, there are at least 87 men and women currently incarcerated in adult prisons with sentences of 10 years or more for crimes they committed as children.
ALBUQUERQUE — Jamari Nelson likes action figures and video games—the “usual kid stuff,” as the 7-year-old put it. One of his favorite activities is making slime out of glue, laundry detergent, and other household chemicals. “I sort of really recommend this one for stress and stuff,” he said, showing off a mustard-yellow slime the consistency of Silly Putty. He likes squeezing it, feeling it ooze between his fingers, stretching it until it becomes so thin that it melts.

“That’s the cool thing about science,” Jamari said. “You don’t really know what’s going to happen.”

Jamari’s science experiments only happen at home these days. In January, his mother pulled him out of Albuquerque Public Schools after the staff at Collet Park Elementary conducted a “threat assessment” on her first-grader, who has autism. Introduced around the country two decades ago, threat assessments originally were intended to identify children who might commit mass shootings.

“He’s not a threat,” said Agatha Cooper, his mom. “He is a student who is struggling.”

Jamari’s predicament illustrates a systemic problem in Albuquerque and serves as a warning to schools nationwide. In well-meaning attempts to prevent gun violence and keep students safe, many districts have implemented threat assessment procedures that can stigmatize whole groups of students, most notably kids with disabilities. That’s precisely what’s occurring in Albuquerque, where these assessments have become commonplace— and where Jamari’s evaluation could remain on his school records for years to come.

An APS spokesperson said in an email that “while the presence of a threat assessment might be considered a stigma, APS’s priority is to provide safety for the student and the APS community.”

Jamari’s assessment followed a January 22 classroom incident, when he was asked to stop playing a game on an iPad and get to work. The boy—about 4 feet tall and weighing 50 pounds—didn’t obey. After a teaching assistant took the tablet from his hands, he grabbed some pencils and tried to jab her. Another adult intervened and tried to physically restrain Jamari. He bit her, and then hit a teacher on the head with a whiteboard, drawing blood.

“Everybody back up and nobody gets hurt,” Jamari said, according to testimony presented at a nine-day public hearing.

The next day, he was deemed a “high-level threat” to the school.

During the 2018–19 school year, APS carried out 834 threat assessments, according to district data. It was the third consecutive year in which a disproportionate number of the assessments was conducted on special education students and African-American children.

Last year, kids in special education, who made up just 18 percent of the total student population, were the subject of 469, or 56 percent, of all threat assessments in Albuquerque. Meanwhile, 80 assessments, or 9.6 percent, were conducted on African-American children, who constitute only 2.6 percent of the student body.

Jamari belongs to both groups.

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While school shootings are horrific, they remain statistically rare. In the 2015–16 school year, 98.8 percent of youth homicides did not occur in a school setting, according to the U.S. Department of Education.

Massacres like the one at Columbine High School in Colorado—where 12 students and a teacher were murdered in 1999—prompted schools in many states to adopt a variety of measures to prevent such tragedies from happening in their communities. In a 1999 FBI report promoting threat assessments, then–Attorney General Janet Reno cautioned that the protocol should be used judiciously “because the students’ aggressive tendencies. The team then develops a plan—tutoring, counseling, mentoring, or other interventions—to address the root causes. When effectively applied, some academic research shows, threat assessments can reduce bullying and suspensions, while contributing to a general sense of safety and well-being among students.

But at their worst, these assessments can reach too far and go awry, catching up children like Jamari—who was physically restrained multiple times before he was deemed a threat to school safety.

Jamari’s parents said school officials never informed them that they were conducting a threat assessment. For many months, they knew little about the process. “It’s just this secret file about your child,” said Gail Stewart, an Albuquerque lawyer who represents the boy’s parents.

The January 22 incident was distressing for many of those involved. Agatha Cooper reported that her son felt terrible about having hurt a teacher, and that he couldn’t sleep for days: “Mom, I saw blood all over her face,” he said, according to her testimony at the public hearing. “Am I like a killer kid or something? Am I a bad kid?”

The teacher who tried to restrain Jamari testified that she suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder and anxiety. She had nightmares. The incident made her re-think her desire to be a teacher.

Two decades after threat assessments were introduced, the question remains: Do they reduce the level of gun violence in schools? Studies are less than conclusive. The most comprehensive analyses have been conducted over the past 18 years at the University of Virginia by education professor Dewey Cornell. He developed a threat assessment model that is used by school districts across the country.

According to his research, threat assessments can have positive effects—less bullying, fewer suspensions, and an elevated feeling of safety. In schools that used Cornell’s model, a study showed, kids were more willing to seek help from adults if another student was bullying them or threatening violence.

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That makes it difficult to address whether threat assessments prevent shootings.

An APS administrator said it’s difficult to know: “Were you successful because of the intervention, or were you successful because student X really didn’t mean it?” said Scott Elder, APS’s chief operations officer. “That’s kind of hard to quantify. But I think we’d rather all err on the side of trying to help somebody and trying to be preventative, because it’s getting too close to home.”

On a recent morning, Jamari combined liquid soap, powdered ammonia, water, sodium carbonate, and citric acid in an Erlenmeyer flask. A blueberry-colored stream of bubbles shot out of the top.

“/weird that we were saving the world and there were robots everywhere,” Jamari said. “Yeah, that’s what I really miss.”

**IMPACT:**

- A month after the story ran, the Public Education Department ruled that Albuquerque Public Schools had violated federal law regarding Jamari’s education. PED concluded that the district’s use of physical restraint was “chaotic and unmonitored.”

- “Jamari’s an enthusiastic 7-year-old, excited about learning—a morning, he spent half an hour showing me a science experiment and teaching me how to make slime out of household chemicals. His experiences in school are troubling, and show that well-intentioned efforts to keep kids safe can have harmful side effects.”

IKE SWETLITZ
ALBUQUERQUE — When Urijah Salazar arrived home from school on March 1, his mother immediately saw that something was off. A fourth-grade special education student at Montezuma Elementary, Urijah often came home from school upset, but on this day he seemed particularly rattled—shaking mad, detached, almost in a state of shock.

"Oh my God," she sputtered. "Is this what they did to you at school?"

"You couldn't imagine the pain," said Urijah, 10, struggling for the right words. "Like, it feels like you're being pulled apart."

"If the same emergency happens over and over again, it's just not an emergency—it's poor planning, and it's failure to respond to the kid's needs. The fact that it continues to be standard operating procedure is beyond negligent."

— DR. GEORGE DAVIS

In its reporting to the federal government, APS has consistently—and falsely—denied that it uses restraint at all.

In order to report this story, Searchlight spoke with dozens of parents, as well as teachers, educational assistants, students and attorneys. Searchlight also reviewed more than 5,000 pages of educational and legal records, and filed multiple public records requests with APS.

ACTS OF DESECRATION

Students with disabilities make up two-thirds of restraint and seclusion cases, according to national data. They are disproportionately African American or—like Urijah Salazar—Native American. That disparity has led the NAACP, the Southern Poverty Law Center and 56 other legal and social justice organizations to demand a federal ban on the practice.

Yet school superintendents and administrators have repeatedly defended the restraint and seclusion of special education students, saying the techniques are necessary to manage behavior that can be disruptive or dangerous. "We believe the use of seclusion and restraint has enabled many students with serious emotional or behavioral disorders to be educated not only within our public schools, but also in the least restrictive and safest environments possible," declared the American Association of School Administrators in a 2012 position paper entitled "Keeping Schools Safe: How Seclusion and Restraint Protect Students and School Personnel."

At the same time, the techniques have come under increasing scrutiny from lawmakers. In 2017, New Mexico joined 29 other states in passing a law setting tight limits on the use of restraint and seclusion in public schools, including a ban on "certain ...
on the use of restraint and seclusion. In response to widespread complaints, federal law put strict reporting requirements on schools, mandating that parents be immediately notified of any incident of restraint or seclusion.

But a 10-month investigation by Searchlight has revealed that its use remains widespread in Albuquerque Public Schools, where it is routinely used to manage special education students. Like Urijah Salazar, many of those students are restrained or secluded after becoming overwhelmed and frustrated in class. Amid staff shortages, inadequate training, and a lack of clear guidance from district leadership, teachers sometimes use restraint and seclusion as a first response to moderate, non-threatening misbehavior such as “inappropriate verbalizations” and property destruction, according to both education and legal records.

A ROUTINE OF RESTRAINT

Special education advocates say that restraining or secluding a child for behavior like Urijah’s—that is, behavior that is predictable and consistent—is not only irresponsible but also illegal; since restraint and seclusion are allowed only in emergency situations. Child psychologists and psychiatrists are adamant that the research uniformly shows damage from restraint and seclusion. Instead of “calming” students down, it makes them more likely to act out aggressively in the future, plunging classrooms into a cycle of outburst and restraint.

“There might be a rare emergency circumstance where restraint could be necessary,” said George Davis, former director of psychiatry for the New Mexico Children, Youth and Families Department. “But if the same emergency happens over and over again, it’s just not an emergency — it’s poor planning, and it’s failure to respond to the kid’s needs. The fact that it continues to be a standard operating procedure is beyond negligent.”

For years, teachers in APS have complained that they are frequently so overwhelmed that they are unable to respond to such behaviors in productive ways. In 2018, Ellen Bernstein, president of the Albuquerque Teachers Federation, voiced these concerns in an ATV publication devoted to what the organization termed a “crisis in the classroom.”

“For some time now, teachers, especially in kindergarten and first grade, have been seeking help from their union because they have students in crisis in their classrooms. Frustrated with the lack of systemic support, they call—sometimes crying, often ready to quit, always in desperation—because when kids are in crisis, teachers are in crisis.”

With special education classrooms overcrowded and understaffed, many teachers report that they are left unprepared to deal with chaotic and even dangerous situations. Special education teachers, in short supply statewide, made up 36 percent of all educator vacancies in 2018, according to a report from New Mexico State University. Many special education teachers hold only an entry-level license, which provides minimal on-the-ground experience with disabilities and related behaviors.

Teachers and educational assistants describe the district as taking an indifferent approach to discipline issues, with schools having to craft their own procedures for responding to difficult behaviors without guidance from the superintendent.

In APS administrative hearings, teachers have publicly reported having nightmares, anxiety and PTSD following incidents of restraint and seclusion. Some have suffered broken bones and concussions while trying to restrain children, according to interviews, incident reports and hearing transcripts obtained by Searchlight.

“Can you imagine how hard it is to manage your own adrenaline while restraining a child who is in the middle of a crisis?” asked Sonya Romero-Smith, who teaches both special education and general education kindergartners at Lew Wallace Elementary in downtown Albuquerque.

“I’ve lost sleep over this. No teacher wants to be in a position where they might hurt a child. This is not what I signed up to do.”

And because federal law requires that special education students be schooled in the least restrictive environments, teachers say incidents of restraint and seclusion are increasingly occurring in general education classrooms.

“We’re not fixing any of the root causes of these behaviors,” said Romero-Smith. “We’re just triaging. We need support from the district to be able to implement some real solutions.”

On that point, parents and teachers agree. And just as overwhelmed teachers are leaving APS’s special education system in droves, so too are parents removing their kids from the district—sometimes homeschooling out of desperation, sometimes leaving the state altogether.

As Urijah Salazar nears the end of his time in elementary school, his mother isn’t sure what she’s going to do. She’s worried about the transition to sixth grade, given the deep mistrust of school staff that Urijah has developed after years of restraint and seclusion.

“He doesn’t trust anyone at school, and why should he?” McGilbert said. “It’s been trauma after trauma. He’s never had the chance to just be a kid.”

The Attorney General’s office has begun investigating the practice of restraint and seclusion in New Mexico schools.

Lawmakers are crafting a bill to address the problem.

“This was the most heavily-sourced story I’ve ever written, and it was a privilege to interview over 300 parents about such an emotionally-charged issue as their children’s treatment at school. It’s also an unusual story, because unlike many issues of child well-being, the excessive use of restraint and seclusion in Albuquerque Public Schools is a problem that could easily be solved by investing in programs that address the underlying cause of difficult behaviors.”

ED WILLIAMS
THE ONCE AND FUTURE CHILD
In October 2019, Searchlight New Mexico curated and presented THE ONCE AND FUTURE CHILD: A PHOTOGRAPHIC HISTORY OF CHILDHOOD IN NEW MEXICO at the Historic Santa Fe Foundation’s El Zaguán Gallery. The exhibit, which drew on historic archives and everyday snapshots, was intended to explore the resiliency and joy of New Mexico’s children—amid even the most difficult situations. The photographs shown here reflect a smattering of the 31 prints that appeared in the exhibit, along with the accompanying essay.

THESE CHILDREN BURN THE LENS WITH THEIR GAZE.

No matter the generation from which they come, for as long as photography has existed in New Mexico they have interrogated the adult world, asking, even pleading, “Will there be a place for me when I grow up?” “Is there a place for me now, as a child?”

Of the fifty states, New Mexico ranks dead last in child well-being. It wasn’t always so. From time out of mind New Mexico has been poor, and its immense and beautiful spaces make the delivery of social services a challenge. But in times past, before the rise of drug culture and consumerism, back when people lived closer to the land and extended families weren’t fractured by migration to the cities, maybe in those good old days New Mexico’s poverty was more salubrious, less destructive. And childhood was happier. Or maybe such notions are a myth. Perhaps through photography we can seek an answer: Look into the eyes of these kids and ask them to tell you how it was, how it is.

Searchlight New Mexico is an investigative journalism nonprofit that has been probing children’s issues in New Mexico for the past two years, and we aren’t finished yet. Don J. Usner, a key member of Searchlight’s team, has documented those issues photographically. He conceived and curated this exhibit, in which the earliest image dates back to 1980 and the most recent is by Usner himself from 2018.

The purpose of this collection, however, is not to offer a strictly chronological view of childhood in New Mexico, but alone an exhaustive survey of the treatment of children in the state’s history of photography.

The images in this exhibit have been selected for their impact and for what they reveal about the world of childhood. They have also been selected for the way they speak to each other across eras, child to child, from the Great Depression to the 1970s and from the turn of the twentieth century to the day before yesterday.

The issues that contribute to New Mexico’s dismal ranking as the worst state in the union in which to be a child will not soon go away, but they can be improved. No one who looks into these children’s eyes can forget that they must be.


ESSAY | BY WILLIAM DEBUYS
Opening spread, pages 26–27:


When 16-year-old Carlos became the target of homophobic bullying, the parents demanded that the school put an end to it. When a special education teacher drove Marcus, who has schizophrenia and autism, up into the mountains and left him to wander lost and alone for hours, Cartwright went ballistic. When Ashley, an 8th grader at Carrizozo Middle School, struggled for two years without a legally required update to her individualized education plan, the parents complained. Loudly.

Now, the way Cartwright saw it, the school was fighting back.

“They think I’m harassing them, but I just want my kids to get a damn education,” Cartwright said, her voice accented with a Southern drawl from her native east Texas. “They’re using CYFD as a weapon to get rid of parents like us.”

A HANDY INTIMIDATION TOOL

A knowingly false report of child abuse is illegal, and many states impose strict penalties against any person who files such a report. In New Mexico, failure to report a case of child abuse is a misdemeanor punishable by a year in jail and a fine of $1,000. But filing a false report effectively carries no punishment whatsoever.

Parents, attorneys, advocates and CYFD employees agree that such malicious reports by school personnel are widespread, both here in New Mexico and across the country.

Searchlight New Mexico has spoken with 28 parents who shared personal stories of retaliation by school employees. Almost invariably, those instances of alleged retaliation followed arguments with the school over special education programs or student behavior problems in class.

CARRIZOZO IS A WINDSWEPT TOWN

Just north of the Sacramento Mountains, a tiny place of 936 souls, where everybody knows everybody else. So when a state investigator showed up at Christy Cartwright’s doorstep in January, the mother of five was horrified to learn that an employee of Carrizozo Municipal Schools had reported her for child abuse.

Her kids had attended the district’s three schools for the past 15 years. Despite a spate of run-ins with the high school principal and special education staff, Cartwright called Carrizozo home. How, she wondered, could anyone there believe she was capable of hurting her children?

Then, less than a month later, another investigator from the New Mexico Children, Youth & Families Department came knocking—this time with two new reports filed by an anonymous school employee.

The first report accused Cartwright of abusing her grandson—who earlier that year had moved to Texas. The second said that Cartwright’s kids had missed more than two consecutive weeks of school: a clear case of educational neglect. It also accused her and her partner, Harold Burch, of giving the children marijuana, suggested the parents were high on meth, and charged them with “brainwashing the children to say they are bullied at school.”

Two months later, CYFD sent Cartwright an official letter concluding that all allegations made by the school were baseless. The state tossed out the case.

By then, Cartwright had a pretty good idea of what—if not who—was behind the complaints. For years, she and Burch had been embroiled in arguments with school administrators over a wide range of issues, from ongoing bullying to special education services.

“I’m a pain in their ass because I won’t leave them alone until they provide accommodations for my kids and stop the bullying,” said Cartwright, ticking off a litany of complaints:

- When 16-year-old Carlos became the target of homophobic bullying, the parents demanded that the school put an end to it.
- When a special education teacher drove Marcus, who has schizophrenia and autism, up into the mountains and left him to wander lost and alone for hours, Cartwright went ballistic.
- When Ashley, an 8th grader at Carrizozo Middle School, struggled for two years without a legally required update to her individualized education plan, the parents complained.

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In New Mexico, reports of child abuse or neglect are routinely referred to law enforcement, regardless of whether CYFD believes the allegation to be true or false.

With no system in place to track and prosecute malicious calls, those who make such reports rarely face any consequence. But their action comes with a price. A malicious accusation can traumatize families and muck up the gears of the state child-welfare system, wasting resources and sending protective service workers into dead-end investigations.

After Carrazco school employees filed accusations against Cartwright and Burch, tensions grew so high that the parents requested a police officer to sit in on meetings with the principal over ongoing bullying.

"Everything's 'bully, bully, bully,' that's all you ever hear about," Principal W. Todd Lindsay said in one such meeting on February 20, as recorded by a police officer’s lapel camera. "I'm telling you for a fact, there is no bullying at this school."

"I don't know who filed those CYFD reports," Lindsay later told Searchlight. "But teachers are mandated by law. If they see something, they have to report it."

"I just can't be any more clear: The root of this is the school district’s exclusion of the child," Stewart added. "Districts do intimidate parents so that parents pick up schooling. And virtually every one of them, she said, is a prejudice against parents who dare to complain about their kids’ disabilities who have had CYFD reports filed against them.

"The CYFD reporting system is a handy-dandy way to intimidate parents," said Gail Stewart, an Albuquerque attorney who has represented dozens of parents of students with disabilities who have had CYFD reports filed against them.

"It's anonymous, it's very, very serious, and it's very, very intimidating. You want people to come forward if they have a suspicion, but the system really can be abused." Though Stewart’s practice does not specifically focus on cases involving false CYFD reports, she said she repeatedly comes across instances of straightforward vendettas against parents who dare to complain about their kids’ schooling. And virtually every one of them, she said, is a parent of a disabled child.

"They are a prejudice against children with disabilities."

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As soon as the phones started ringing at the Statewide Central Intake call center in 2011, it became apparent that the hotline, though a valuable tool for identifying children in danger, could be used for vindictive purposes.

"Every hour we spend sorting out false and malicious allegations is an hour taken from a frightened child who truly needs our help," said then-Secretary Yolanda Daines shortly after the hotline’s launch. "Please find a healthier way to express your anger, and don’t take time away from a child who might be in danger."

Years later, CYFD employees say that the Statewide Central Intake office, or SCI, continues to receive malicious reports on an almost daily basis, most commonly from school staff and divorced couples in the midst of custody battles.

"We don’t want our agency to be used as a mean guard dog to bully parents," said SCI manager Paul Williams. "But I see it all day long."

In 2018, the call center received 40,643 reports of abuse and neglect. Around 6,000 of those callers, or 14.5 percent, self-identified as school employees.

According to multiple CYFD employees, that number reflects a small fraction of the actual calls from school personnel, since most of them report anonymously. Williams estimates that between 40 percent to 50 percent of calls come from schools when class is in session. Of the calls that CYFD goes on to investigate, only 28 percent are substantiated.

FALSE REPORTS WILL CONTINUE

Educators are in a unique position to spot children in danger, and they play an indispensable role in the state’s child-welfare system. Following multiple high-profile child abuse cases in recent years, CYFD has strongly encouraged teachers to report their suspicions, however small.

Many teachers have students who are at high risk of danger—from hunger, drug abuse or domestic violence—and they are acutely aware of the signs of potential abuse and neglect, as well as the consequences of not reporting. If there’s a question, teachers interviewed for this story said, it’s better to err on the side of caution and call CYFD.

"The pressure on teachers to report is enormous," said Ellen Bernstein, president of the Albuquerque Teachers Federation. "It’s my duty to report. If I’m wrong, that’s for the investigator to decide. But I can’t imagine a teacher reporting a family for abuse without any evidence."

Given the extent to which CYFD and law enforcement rely on educators, officials fear that any attempt to dissuade good-faith reporting risks discouraging potentially valid calls—a chance the agency is loath to take given the prevalence of child abuse in New Mexico.

"There is a potential for the system to be abused, and CYFD could take a proactive role," said CYFD Deputy Secretary Terry Locke. "But the tradeoff is that we might dissuade people from making [valid] calls."

Given this hands-off policy, special education advocates say false reports like the ones filed against Christy Cartwright and Harold Burch in Carrazco will surely continue.

Principal Lindsay recently informed the parents that he "can’t guarantee" they won’t get any more school-based CYFD reports, according to a police recording obtained by Searchlight. The principal has filed a harassment complaint against them with local police and requested a restraining order.

The police department says there are no legal grounds to pursue the complaint.

Christy Cartwright and her husband, Harold Burch, continue to spar with school administrators—and, Christy says, school employees have continued calling CYFD on the family.

"The time I spent with Christy Cartwright and her family was a big eye-opener, laying bare the challenges parents of students with disabilities face—especially families in rural districts, where kids often have no alternative to the local public school," Christy was a fierce mom, and one who wouldn’t leave school officials alone about problems with her kids’ education, even if it meant getting tangled up in child abuse investigations."
FREEDOM’S CHALLENGE

WHEN MOMS ARE RELEASED FROM PRISON, FAMILIES FACE NEW HURDLES
FOR ALMOST THREE YEARS, Stephanie Baker’s young sons knew her as a prisoner in an orange jumpsuit. They visited her at Springer Correctional Facility, passing through concrete walls and barbed fences once every few months; it was difficult for their maternal great-grandparents, with whom they lived in Roswell, to make the five-hour drive to the prison.

In nightly phone calls, the boys asked their mother when she was coming home. Her release had been delayed so many times, she no longer discussed possible dates with them for fear of getting their hopes up. So when she opened the prison’s front door in the early evening of September 26, the sight of her was almost too much to bear. “Mom! Mom! Mom!” the youngest yelled, jumping into her arms. The oldest began to cry.

By Baker’s own admission, she had never been a good mother. Before she went to prison in 2016, her priority was meth—scoring it, smoking it, selling it. She would leave for fear of getting their hopes up. So when she opened the prison, visiting the kids on the weekends. Her grandparents, both in their 60s. Often, she would drop off the youngest, who was still a baby, and take off for days at a time. When she was arrested, it was for using a stolen credit card that someone had given her as payment for meth.

“I was a very bad person,” she said. “Honestly, I just didn’t care about anyone or anything. If I was hurting you or screwing you over, it didn’t matter to me.”

Now she must prove—to her boys, to her grandparents, to herself—that she’s changed. That she will stay clean. That she can be a good mom. That she’s not going anywhere. For the first time, she can be a good mom. That she isn’t going anywhere.

Like many women who end up behind bars, Baker bears the scars of trauma. As a teenager, she was close by when a friend was shot to death while sitting in a car. Stephanie tried to save her. Another friend hung himself. Stephanie found him. A close uncle—her mother’s brother—was fatally shot by police after trying to avoid capture on drug-related charges. She herself has suffered violence: The father of her children, also a meth user, once dragged her from a moving car by her hair. The road burns lasted for weeks.

“Prison saved me,” Baker said, a few weeks before her release. At first, she didn’t want to be saved. But gradually, after witnessing the transformation of other inmates and in learning new ways of thinking, she began to understand the harm she had caused. The first paradigm shift began in the prison’s substance abuse program. The stories of her fellow inmates resonated deeply with her. She vowed to leave meth behind and forge a new life, for herself and for her kids. Eventually, she became a mentor in the program. Through an initiative that teaches parenting skills to incarcerated mothers, she learned how to be more patient, more attentive. She got her GED and helped other inmates get theirs. Soon she was dreaming of becoming a substance abuse counselor, and enrolled in a sociology course while still in prison.

“Having to go through the programming and having to face my demons, I’m a whole different person,” she said. “I have a whole new outlook on life, and what I want life to be.”

In prison, drug-free and clear-headed, Baker began to deal with her painful past. Her transformation, aided by Springer’s drug rehabilitation, parenting and educational programs, makes it likely that she will succeed where so many others fail, said Acting Warden Robert Gonzales.

A 2015 study by the New Mexico Statistical Analysis Center and Instituto for Social Research found that women who take part in educational programming are less likely to re-offend.

Baker is unusually well-equipped to rise above her past. Unlike many former inmates, she has strong family support—which experts say is crucial in helping released women avoid reincarceration. She has a comfortable, safe place to live, for now, while she’s resettling and rebuilding a relationship with her children, she’s staying with her sister in Clovis. This spring, she’ll begin coursework at Eastern New Mexico University toward a degree in substance abuse counseling.

Her parenting class at Springer Correctional Facility taught her that it’s better for released mothers to reunite with their children gradually, to minimize the disruption to their lives. So for now, she would live in Clovis with her sister, visiting the kids on the weekends. Her grandparents had consented to grant her custody, but both parties agreed to wait until she gets settled and rebuilds a relationship with the boys.
“She can’t step in as a full-time mom right away,” said Connie Baker, her grandmother. “She’s going to have to ease her way into it. She’s not used to the problems that come up every day.”

One late September afternoon, two days after her release, Stephanie Baker sat in the living room of her sister’s house, wearing her sister’s borrowed clothes—black jeans and a white-and-black striped shirt—waiting for her sons to arrive. It would be their first night together in years, and Baker was both excited and anxious. How, she wondered aloud, do you rebuild a relationship with kids you’ve barely seen for three years?

She had wanted to spend the day watching the boys play soccer at their weekly Saturday games in Roswell, but instead she had to spend it with her parole officer in Clovis, learning the terms of her post-incarceration existence—daily check-ins, a 6:30 pm curfew, unannounced home visits. More than 100 miles away, her grandmother, aunt and sister cheered the boys on.

Stephanie’s incarceration has been hard on Connie and her husband. Not only did they have to watch another family member go to prison, they had to effectively become parents again at a time when most people are entering retirement. During an afternoon watching the kids play at the park near the family’s house, about a month before Stephanie’s release, Connie Baker’s affection for them was clear. But she’s also ready to relinquish her role as a substitute mom. “I’ll miss them a lot,” she said, keeping an eye on the youngest as he slid down the slide. “But I’m also looking forward to it.”

Stephanie is determined not to take her kids, or her family, for granted again. “Out there you don’t realize what you’re missing, because you’re so caught up in the game,” she said while still behind bars. “You don’t realize you’re missing that precious time with your kids.”

The oldest, an outgoing boy with an easy smile, carries an anger and resentment borne from that absence. For years, he waited for his mother to visit; despite her promises, she more often than not never showed up. While she was in prison, he started acting out, talking back to his grandparents and being disruptive in school. He struggled to make friends.

Studies show that the incarceration of a mother can be more damaging than a father’s imprisonment. A 2018 study by researchers from the University of California Irvine found that a mother behind bars “may bring more family instability than the father’s.” It may also play a contributing role in poor cognitive development, though researchers warn that it’s difficult to parse how much of these consequences are due to the incarceration and how much is due to other factors.

The children of incarcerated parents suffer in profound ways. They can develop mental health problems, including depression and difficulty forming attachments, as well as physical ailments like migraines and obesity. They often exhibit behavioral problems and struggle in school, which in turn can place them at greater risk of becoming incarcerated themselves upon adulthood.
A study by the American Bar Association reports that nationwide, 65 percent of inmates in juvenile lockup have a disability. In New Mexico, a state with one of the highest rates of child trauma and child poverty, that number is much higher. An astounding 99.5 percent of youth offenders in state custody have at least one psychiatric diagnosis.

"Most of these kids have had a pattern of difficulty for years," said Andrew Hsi, a University of New Mexico pediatrition and lead author of the Sentencing Commission study. "The system and people around them failed to intervene when they were younger and more amenable to help. Where they are now is a product of societal neglect."

In 2015, New Mexico spent a total of nearly $75 million on Juvenile Justice Services, with an average daily inmate population of just over 200 kids, according to a Legislative Finance Committee report. Cases like these aren't supposed to happen. At both the state and federal levels, laws and procedures have been put in place to identify kids like Sebastian, provide them with specialized learning programs and set them on a path to success.

Those procedures, however, are frequently flouted. Long before Sebastian Montano sat in handcuffs and leg shackles following his arrest at Alamogordo High, teachers, administrators and police missed countless opportunities to address his outbursts—sometimes denying special education services in clear violation of state and federal guidelines.

Officials with Alamogordo Public Schools declined to be interviewed, though Doyle Syling, the district's chief of staff, responded by email that "The District takes pride in providing all of our students a Free Appropriate Public Education, despite limited funding and resources."

TOO LITTLE, TOO LATE

A key tenant of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, passed by Congress in 1990, is that people with disabilities have the right to a free and appropriate public education. IDEA requires schools to identify children by age 3 and create an Individualized Education Program, or IEP, to ensure their learning will not be disrupted by their disability.
It was near the end of his freshman year at Alamogordo High that Sebastian tried to commit suicide.

By then, he had been admitted to psychiatric treatment centers four times. Each time, he made impressive gains; his grades improved and his behavior and mood problems vanished, according to discharge notes. With each return to Alamogordo High, his behavior problems resurfaced, and by the end of that freshman year, he had been written up at least 34 times for disciplinary infractions.

Two and a half years passed since the original evaluation by the school psychologist, and Sebastian still hadn’t received services to address his behavior problems. In 2017, Russell once again evaluated Sebastian, confirmed his previous diagnosis and urged the school to begin implementing behavioral supports.

Instead, school personnel referred Sebastian to law enforcement—even summoning the police when his behavior clearly called for intervention from a mental health professional. When he threatened to kill himself, the school counselor called police. When he cut himself intentionally, the assistant principal called police. And when he wandered onto the grounds of Alamogordo High School, guidance counselor Mark Sanchez—who had been a member of his special ed support team—called police.

In 2017, the school psychologist made the unusual move of requesting a formal assessment, the first step in setting up a Behavior Intervention Plan that would address the root causes of his disruptive behavior. And once again, the school neglected to begin the process.

“We see this kind of thing all the time—a lot of kids who need Behavioral Intervention Plans don’t have one,” said Jason Gordon, a litigation manager with Disability Rights New Mexico. “If there was a BIP like there should have been, we wouldn’t be talking about criminal behavior.”

Which is where things lied in May 2017, after Sebastian and a group of friends brought a Nerf gun to school, stuck metal staples in the end of the Styrofoam bullets and shot them at classmates. School administrators and campus police treated the episode as a serious criminal matter—charging him with weapons possession, aggravated assault and gang affiliation.

Later that night, Sebastian ate two bottles of Trileptal, an anti-seizure medication. Though he survived, he refused to return to school.

He spent much of the following year wandering around town, sometimes sleeping in a park down the street from his house, as his mother tried to figure out how to get him to finish high school. He became more and more detached until, in October 2018, he walked back onto the grounds of Alamogordo High School.

CRISIS WITHOUT INTERVENTION

Sebastian’s arrest for trespassing on campus that day sent him into a paranoid episode, according to his mother. He ran away from home, and when he returned on the day of his 17th birthday, he became convinced the battery light in the smoke detector was a camera, installed to record his every move. He flew into a rage and picked up a kitchen knife, waving it in the air and ranting nonsensically.

His sister dialed 911 and explained that her brother was in the midst of a mental health emergency.

“Thank God you’re here,” Sebastian told the police as they stepped inside the house. “Just kill me.”

The officers persuaded him to put down the knife and took him to the emergency room. Later, against the protestations of his mother, he was charged with felony assault with a deadly weapon and criminal damage to property.

Awaiting trial in the Doña Ana County Juvenile detention center, Sebastian agreed to talk to a reporter in February. He spoke in short sentences with a monotone inflection.

He spoke in short sentences with a monotone inflection. Looking down between words, he ticked through the typical day in detention. “We wake up at 7. Then we chill for a while. Then we get to watch TV. Then at 9 our meds come. It’s alright.”

Sebastian’s mother was less accepting. She was livid about the charges, furious that after so many years of seeking help, it had all come down to this.

“This wasn’t assault and battery. This was a psychotic breakdown.” Barela said, her voice quivering, “I feel like a failure. I feel like I betrayed him. But in the moment, it was so frightening I didn’t know what to do.”

There wasn’t much she could have done. Like so many towns across New Mexico, Alamogordo lacks a mental health crisis intervention team. Police Chief Brian Peete recently began requiring mental health training for his officers, but even with that training, interactions with police often end in criminal charges.

Sebastian would spend the next three months in jail before taking a plea bargain ahead of trial. A few months ago, he returned home, outfitted with an ankle monitor.

As a condition of his release, he is required to enroll in a residential treatment program. So far, his mother has not been able to find a single one that will take him—thanks to his criminal record.

We see this kind of thing all the time— a lot of kids who need Behavioral Intervention Plans don’t have one.”

— JASON GORDON, DISABILITY RIGHTS NM
Albuquerque Public Schools serves roughly 84,000 students, and in the last three academic years, suicide referrals have risen an average of more than 30 percent.

For Aura—a shy, motivated, creative high school sophomore—the support of a caring mother proved insufficient to counteract a quick and troubling slide toward her last decision. And while there’s a tendency following any suicide to assign blame—to a parent, a gun, a school, a moment of crisis or mental illness—Aura’s death rebukes such thinking, illuminating the most pressing questions that families and experts struggle to understand.

Changing Patterns and Prevention Efforts

The culture around suicide at Eldorado High School, according to interviews with more than a dozen students, was simultaneously casual and deeply felt. “People talked or joked about killing themselves at least weekly,” said Rachael Rhykerd, a student who graduated this past May. Jokes like “KMS” (kill myself) and “I wanna die lol” repeatedly surfaced as memes in texts and on social media.

Narratives of suicide were embedded in the curriculum. In Aura’s ninth grade English class, she read the 2007 novel Thirteen Reasons Why, which follows the suicide of a 17-year-old girl. Several former Eldorado students expressed concern over teachers assigning the book, which in 2017 was challenged or banned in more schools than any other, according to the American Library Association. It has since been popularized by the Netflix series of the same title—released two weeks after Aura died—and research has focused on both its harmful and helpful effects.

Aura’s death was one in a series that has troubled the school since 2016. “We’ve lost a student to suicide every year for the past four years,” said Tanya Kuhnee, who teaches English at Eldorado. “Every suicide has resurfaced the emotions from previous suicides. It’s really affected our kids deeply.”

Albuquerque Public Schools serves roughly 84,000 students, and in the last three academic years, suicide referrals have risen an average of more than 30 percent, according to referral records provided to Searchlight New Mexico. Despite five requests, Eldorado Principal Martin Sandoval was not available to comment. But teachers and counselors agree that Eldorado has introduced more anti-suicide programming in the last two years than any other public school in Albuquerque. The police and fire department were brought in to evaluate protocols; students advocated for Breaking the Silence (a small-group discussion guide for communities to combat stigma and cope with lives lost) and the counseling department conducted school-wide QPR training (“Question. Persuade. Refer.”), a national awareness and prevention seminar.

Then, this past March, another student took his own life, and many students turned to their teachers, frustrated. “They said, ‘We’ve been working on this. How can this still be happening?’” said Kuhnee.

Teachers and administrators, too, have been beside themselves. Several recall seeing the principal and instructors crying, exasperated and exhausted at all-staff meetings in the days following a suicide.

Faced with these continuing cycles of anguish, members of the Albuquerque Teachers Federation have pushed for incisive approaches to deal with mental health before and after major events.

“There really aren’t changes happening or resources available to help support teens with mental health issues, and the stigma is still great,” said Sean Thomas, who has taught social studies at Eldorado for 14 years.

At the start of each academic year, when teachers attend meetings on new textbooks and policies, they have asked for more innovative training and more probing outside speakers to address ways in which teachers can be mindful of mental health concerns. And, according to Kuhnee, “every year the district says, ‘We don’t have the resources for that.’”

APS Counseling responds that it always sends in crisis resources and makes them available long after a tragedy. After an incident of suicide, it conducts evaluations to
identify the services that were provided as well as the number of times a student reached out to counselors and what, if anything, resulted from prior communication.

Aurra Gardner was a reserved rule-follower who studied hard to maintain high marks and played cello in the Eldorado and Albuquerque youth orchestras. She loved to draw, write poetry and study birds, especially chickadees. She would climb the trees in her backyard and sit there all day, naming the species of every bird that visited.

Aurra’s standards for herself were high, and they got higher the more she excelled. She scored in the 99th percentile on her 10th grade PSAT. At parent-teacher conferences, instructors told Kerianne what a joy it was to have Aurra in their classes. She would climb the trees in her backyard and sit there all day, naming the species of every bird that visited.

Aurra noticed the species of every bird that visited.

On the morning of February 21, Aurra hid in her closet. She told her mother that her teachers hated her and worried she might fail her upcoming tests. That day, Kerianne, who had been emailing and calling the school for help, walked Aurra into a counselor’s office. “I had to just show up to get their attention,” Kerianne said. In her recollection, the counselor asked Aurra if she really believed her teachers hated her. Aurra responded in muted tones.

Kerianne asked the counselor to talk to Aurra on a weekly basis, but that apparently didn’t happen. The week of March 6, Aurra had a panic attack and hid in the school bathroom, spurring the automated attendance system to call Kerianne. At home, her breath was quick and shallow when Kerianne asked her why she’d ditched class.

Kerianne felt she had exhausted her options to get Aurra into a counselor’s office. The following morning, Kerianne and Aurra’s siblings heard what they thought was the sound of a cello case falling. Current and retired teachers, along with several counselors, agree that the district’s counseling services need more dedicated resources. They cite chronic understaffing and overwhelming workloads—Eldorado typically assigns more than 300 students to each counselor, according to Thomas.

“He manage too high a population,” said Thomas, the social studies teacher. “They’re overworked, buried in administrative paper, and there is really no one on campus who focuses strictly on mental health.”

THE LIMITS OF REASON

Two years since Aurra died, Kerianne doesn’t traffic in blame or self-reprimanding questions. She doesn’t admonish the school or a counselor or seize on details like how much time Aurra spent in the pages of any one book. She also doesn’t blame the gun, but said she won’t live with firearms in her home again.

The family had long kept guns locked in a safe in the house, but after a couple of incidents—a burglary and a man seen jumping over the back fence—Kerianne said she “stepped up our efforts to be safe.” She hid a 40-caliber semiautomatic pistol in the master bedroom and told Aurra where it was in case of a break-in.

Aurra was well acquainted with how to safely operate a firearm. She had participated in rifle classes at summer camps and had taken a gun safety course.

“There are many ways she could’ve done things and come out with the same result,” said Kerianne, who often looks up at the Cooper’s hawks that glide over Albuquerque. “There is nothing and everything left to say.”

IMPACT:

Following publication of this story, Albuquerque Public Schools teachers demanded action and support from the district.

Students demanded peer-to-peer programs, different prevention programming, and licensed in-school therapists to help counter a “mental health crisis.”

APS school board promised to roll out newly funded programs in the next school year.

“The reporting of this piece was trying and, at times, spurred secondary trauma for myself and several sources. It left me curious to explore the true sociological impacts of suicide on New Mexico. To this day, I’m still struck by how hard it is to predict suicide and how blunt and stigmatizing our interventions can feel.”

— NICK PACHELLI
STOLEN AND ERASED

A Navajo girl was exploited and sex trafficked across New Mexico. Why did so many fail to help her?

By Nick Pachelli | December 17, 2019 | Photographs by Adria Malcolm
GROWING up on the Zuni and Navajo reservations of western New Mexico, Eva moved continuously between her mother’s home and that of her grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. The only constant in her life was Haley, her sister 4½ years her junior.

Eva was the effusive one, admired for her lanky limbs and her gift for sketching. She was the one to initiate games of basketball in the driveway, scolding her cousins when they didn’t pass the ball to Haley.

The girls’ mother, Lea, worked multiple jobs as a nurse’s aide, and the family had a comfortable life in an area where the median household income hovers at $27,500 a year. Lea entered the girls in child beauty pageants in the big cities of Gallup, Albuquerque and Las Cruces. She was the kind of mother who on a whim would take them on a road trip to White Sands Monument or the redwood forests of northern California, where the girls twirled and laid silent under the trees at night.

That all changed the year Eva turned 11. Lea had long struggled with alcoholism, and as the disease worsened she increasingly left her daughters in the care of others or alone at home. When she was too intoxicated to drive, she propped Eva on a pile of blankets to see over the steering wheel of the family’s 1999 Honda Civic. Eva began skipping school, where she got in trouble for smoking. In seventh grade, she was expelled for fighting and never went back.

Only later would Eva and Haley confide in their grandmother that their stepfather physically, sexually, and emotionally abused them. “Don’t you tell Grandma what happens in this house,” he often said.

Heidi said she kept as close a watch as she could, and when she saw them, she would give the girls almost anything they wanted. For Eva’s 12th birthday, she bought her an iPhone. So Eva could call whenever they were left alone at home.

“Buying her that phone was the worst thing I ever did,” Heidi says now.

On December 8, 2015, Eva saw a Facebook message from a young man with a thick brow and a round jawline. Of course, trafficking and exploitation are hardly a new phenomenon in indigenous communities. For centuries, sexual violence has been a cornerstone of the treatment of Native American populations, integral to colonization and displacement. Sex trafficking of contemporary indigenous women is “almost indistinguishable from the colonial tactics...
In the fall of 2016, says Crotty. “We’ve seen our children trafficked by their own leaders have also found, family members have been known people are most vulnerable to trafficking. And, as tribal homeless youth and transgender or two-spirit/LGBTQ Native. As noted in Crotty’s white paper, female minors, ability to predators, the vast majority of whom are non-

Involvement in the foster care system exacerbate vulner-

Press, 2015

Sexual Violence in Native America author of

writes Sarah Deer, professor of law at Kansas University and of enslavement, exploitation, exportation, and relocation,” writes Sarah Deer, professor of law at Kansas University and author of The Beginning and End of Rape: Confronting Sexual Violence in Native America (University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

Today, high rates of chemical dependency, abuse, and involvement in the foster care system exacerbate vulnerability to predators, the vast majority of whom are non-Native. As noted in Crotty’s white paper, female minors, homeless youth and transgender or two-spirit/LGBTQ people are most vulnerable to trafficking.

For weeks after the funeral, Eva lay on the floor of her grandmother’s house, while her phones buzzed with messages. By now, she had four Samsung cellphones, all supplied by D, who texted daily, demanding more photos.

As noted in Crotty’s white paper, female minors, homeless youth and transgender or two-spirit/LGBTQ people are most vulnerable to trafficking. And, as tribal leaders have also found, family members have been known to exchange younger children for money, drugs or basic needs. “We’ve seen our children trafficked by their own family, and most don’t even know they were trafficked,” says Crotty.

MCKINLEY COUNTY, NEW MEXICO — in the fall of 2016, D redoubled his threats against Eva, promising to harm her grandmother and abduct her sister if she spoke out. If anyone could have helped Eva, it would have been her mother. Lea knew, or at least suspected, what was happening; she had seen the nude photos of her daughter and did nothing. Then in November, she died suddenly in an alcohol-fueled accident near Shiprock.

For weeks after the funeral, Eva lay on the floor of her grandmother’s house, while her phones buzzed with messages. By now, she had four Samsung cellphones, all supplied by D, who texted daily, demanding more photos. By now, she had four Samsung cellphones, all supplied by D, who texted daily, demanding more photos, threatening violence unless she picked herself off the ground and met him. Which she did, as if pulled by a wire tethered to her feet—driving or being driven to faraway towns, switching between cars with strange men.

Sex trafficking is a growing crime that’s estimated to generate $99 billion a year globally, and in the U.S., people of color—mostly black and indigenous women—are victimized at the highest rates.

After conducting more than 75 interviews and gathering data from 18 agencies, Searchlight shared Eva’s story with tribal police officers, tribal officials, and former clinicians for the Indian Health Service. No one expressed surprise.

“Tribal agencies are understaffed, underfunded, and undermined in this type of response,” says Ramah Navajo Police Chief Darin Soland. “Once someone who is being victimized goes from tribal to state land or to a municipality and maybe comes back, it’s hard to get the agencies to reach out and communicate with each other to identify someone.”

A July 2019 study in the journal Criminology & Public Policy explored the reasons why law enforcement officers rarely recognize trafficking victims. It found that some say they are unaware that this is a crime over which they have jurisdiction; while others don’t believe it is an issue present in their communities. The majority of states, including New Mexico, require no law enforcement training on human trafficking.

And while lawmakers have proposed legislation, their efforts have largely stalled. The renewal of the Violence Against Women Act, which would better assist indigenous victims and increase cross-agency communication, is stalled in the U.S. Senate.

In a written response to questions, a spokesperson from the FBI’s New Mexico headquarters wrote, “The FBI is committed to fulfilling our mandate to investigate the most serious crimes in Indian Country. The FBI aggressively investigates any reports of human trafficking, using force-multiplying Human Trafficking Task Forces.”

The latest national figures, however, show that federal prosecutors declined nearly half of all cases in Indian Country in 2017. The District of New Mexico U.S. Attorney’s office, the third busiest district in the country for Indian Country cases, has declined 69 percent of cases that fall under the “Offenses committed within Indian Country” statute and 80 percent of child abuse cases, accord-

ing to data from the TRAC research center at Syracuse University.

“We’re letting the FBI off the hook way too easily,” said Mary Kathryn Nagle, a Cherokee Nation lawyer and counsel to the National Indigenous Women’s Resource Center.

“And I wish more senators would call them to account for how few investigations go anywhere. They need to have an oversight hearing on why the FBI is abdicating its duties.”

In December 2016, Eva was handcuffed outside a Dollar Store in northeast Albuquerque for stealing her grandmother’s truck, and placed in a 90-day program at Butterfly Healing Center, a coed treatment center for Native American teens in Taos. That’s where, at last, she began to talk.

Her disclosure set in motion a string of reports that reverberated across agencies and culminated in a three-hour interview with the FBI. To date, no charges have been filed.

In the last 14 months since departing a safe house, Eva, now 18, and Haley, 13, have each enrolled in two new schools and changed apartments three times. Eva has gone missing once. She has also been arrested once.

Many nights, she resists sleep. Nightmares ensue, and the sensation of near-sleep reminds her of the feeling she experienced when she was being trafficked—weightless and contorted underwater.

“I want to make it not real. But I was living there. And sometimes, I’m still living there.”

“Nobody saw me. Not until the very end.”

My time reporting on human trafficking in New Mexico and across the West has left me with strong, lasting bonds but also an enduring sense of frustration and pessimism about the failures and future of the systems meant to protect victims of trafficking, especially indigenous victims. I’m continually shocked by how local and federal leaders can’t even account for the true scope or outlook of this complex issue. This, in turn, erases the experiences of those who have survived this atrocity and those we’ve lost.”

— NICK PACHELLI
For months, Clovis dairy farmer Art Schaap has watched his life go down the drain. Instead of selling milk, he is dumping 15,000 gallons a day—enough to provide a carton at lunch to 240,000 children. Instead of working 24/7 to keep his animals healthy, he’s planning to exterminate all 4,000 of his cows, one of the best herds in Curry County’s booming dairy industry.

The 54-year-old second-generation dairy farmer learned in August 2018 that his water, his land, his crops—even the blood in his body—were contaminated with chemicals that migrated to his property from nearby Cannon Air Force Base.

The toxins, collectively known as PFAS, have caused rampant pollution on military installations, something the U.S. Department of Defense has known about for decades but routinely failed to disclose. Now the state’s dairy industry is ground zero in an unprecedented crisis. For the first time ever, PFAS is threatening the American food supply.

“This has poisoned everything I’ve worked for and everything I care about,” Schaap (pronounced ‘skahp’) said. “I can’t sell the milk. I can’t sell beef. I can’t sell the cows. I can’t sell crops or my property. The Air Force knew they had contamination. What I really wonder is, why didn’t they say something?”

There is plenty the Air Force could have said. It has for decades been aware that PFAS chemicals are toxic to humans, animals and the environment. By 2000, industry scientists and the Environmental Protection Agency had meticulously documented that the compounds persist in the environment for millennia. They are linked to cancer, thyroid disease, lowered immunity and developmental disorders, among other serious health problems.

They have poisoned the groundwater on at least 121 U.S. military installations, the DOD disclosed in 2018. Several of those sites are located in New Mexico.

When the Air Force finally tested Schaap’s water on August 28, 2018, it was found to be so polluted that the military immediately began delivering bottled water to the family home. One of Schaap’s wells tested at 12,000 parts per trillion, or 171 times the EPA health advisory level of 70 ppt.

The contamination casts a long shadow over New Mexico’s all-important dairy business—the leading agricultural industry in the state, generating more than $1.3 billion annually. Curry County is one of the nation’s top milk producers. Home to 86,000 milk cows, it boasts 25 dairies that sell 1.9 billion pounds of milk around the country.

Schaap’s dairy is ground zero, but this may soon change. The toxic plume is spreading slowly and inexorably—not only under Schaap’s fields but across the Ogallala Aquifer, the largest aquifer in the nation, which spans 174,000 square miles and parts of eight states.

Based on more than a dozen interviews and an examination of more than 100 chemical studies, government reports and court cases, Searchlight New Mexico discovered that:

- A July 2017 inspection by Air Force scientists found contamination near the Schaap dairy—an inspection that came eight years after the Air Force identified the need for it. That report specified evidence of at least 10 serious contamination sites where trainees had sprayed hundreds of gallons of PFAS-containing firefighting foam.

- The Air Force reported its findings to the New Mexico Environment Department, but not to the people living nearby.

- NMED failed to notify nearby residents in 2017. More than a year later, it issued a notice of violation to the Air Force, which refused to take corrective actions in response.
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To date, there has been no definitive accounting of the harm done to the public health, food chain and economy in New Mexico, impacts that are especially pointed in the Air Force communities of Clovis and Alamogordo.

“This is a national contamination crisis at this point, one that’s overtaken Art Schaap, his family, his animals, his land, the water supply—and quite profoundly all of us have been misled or outright lied to about a toxic chemical that’s invaded the very bloodstream of America.”

Schaap. “It’s potentially been in the groundwater the whole time I’ve owned the dairy,” he said.

For years he watched from his fields as trainees at Cannon Air Force Base set fire to mock airplanes and consummated the flames with clouds of PFAS-laced firefighting foam. The chemicals made the fire resistant to water, dirt and heat, which makes it extremely effective at snuffing out jet-fuel fires.

The Air Force says it is going above and beyond to address the contamination.

The EPA on February 14 announced its intention to regulate the chemicals by year’s end, but the agency’s plan does not include immediate cleanup actions and has been widely criticized as foot-dragging.

The EPA has failed for 20 years to regulate PFAS or any other new hazardous substance for drinking water, advocates have noted. In 2016, it issued a “lifetime health advisory” for PFOA and PFOS, recommending that individual or combined concentrations of the chemicals in drinking water should be no greater than 70 ppt. (One part per trillion is roughly equivalent to a grain of sand in an Olympic-sized swimming pool.)

Its reluctance to act on PFAS—used not only in firefighting foam, but also in non-stick cookware and hundreds of other products—comes despite the dogged efforts of environmental advocates like the EWG and lawmakers from states like Michigan, New York and Pennsylvania, where contamination is profound.

Scientific research long ago established a link between the chemicals and serious health impacts, such as altered puberty, endocrine disruption, pregnancy disorders, lowered fertility and increased risk of cancers (liver, testicular, kidney and pancreatic).

“The situation is urgent,” Udall told Searchlight. He and New Mexico’s congressional delegation want the DOD to immediately start providing clean, safe water to affected farmers.

Though the NMED has known of the threat since at least 2017, it neglected to contact the community and its many dairy farmers. Milk was bought and sold, crossed state lines, mixed with that from other dairies, and consumed by millions, often at incredibly low concentrations,” Andrews said.

On January 23, in Albuquerque, Senator Tom Udall met with Schaap, four neighboring dairy farmers and representatives from the Dairy Producers of New Mexico and vowed to find solutions. A long list of New Mexico lawmakers—from Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham to U.S. Representative Ben Ray Lujan and Senator Martin Heinrich—have taken up the cause.

So have authorities at the local level.

“Property values are going to go down, and that’s going to hurt the tax base,” said Seth Martin, a Curry County Commissioner and a dairy farmer himself. “That’s something we really have to be prepared for.”

Udall, Heinrich and other New Mexico lawmakers have for months called on the Environmental Protection Agency to develop federal regulations and drinking water standards for PFOS and PFOA, the chemicals that are front and center in the Clovis crisis.

The PFAS family contains thousands of compounds known as per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances. The best-known are perfluorooctanesulfonic acid (PFOS) and perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA), but scientists believe the more obscure varieties pose health and environmental risks as well. These chemicals “seem to have the ability to harm an incredible number of different biological processes, and often at incredibly low concentrations,” Andrews said.

To date, there has been no definitive accounting of the harm done to the public health, food chain and economy in New Mexico, impacts that are especially pointed in the Air Force communities of Clovis and Alamogordo.

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For Schaap, the impact is personal. He has already laid off 40 employees and is now preparing to euthanize his cattle. With no income, he can’t afford to buy feed, which costs him $350,000 a month. He says he can’t even sell his cows for dog food.

“I don’t care what they do, my property will never have the same value again,” Schaap said. “Who wants to live in a community with contaminated water?”

AMY LINN

“I really want to emphasize this: Our focus is drinking water for human consumption—not for agriculture, not for anything else,” Air Force spokesman Mark Kinkade told Searchlight.

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New Mexico is expected to soon follow other states in adopting PFAS limits far lower than federal guidelines allow.

“The PFAS story is, in many ways, a horror story, one that’s overtaken Art Schaap, his family, his animals, his land, the water supply—and every single one of us. It was haunting to talk to Schaap—one of the nicest people you’d ever want to meet—and realize how profoundly all of us have been misled or outright lied to about a toxic chemical that’s invaded the very bloodstream of America.”

IMPACT:
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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