

The Doña Ana Arts Council, Inc. (DAAC) is a non-profit organization working to improve the quality of life in Las Cruces and Southern New Mexico by ensuring that the performing, visual, and literary arts are an integral part of education, economic growth, and community development.



Passionate Leadership | For a Tough Era

Article by Joe Burgess
Photography by Bill Faulkner and courtesy of the Dona Ana Arts Council



▲ For the Dona Ana Arts Council: Heather Pollard, Board Member and Development Committee Chair; Ceci Vasconcellos, Executive Director; Lanova Sheets, Board President; and David Salcido, Manager of the Rio Grande Theatre.

"I love to promote people who can do things that I can't do," states Ceci Vasconcellos, executive director of the Doña Ana Arts Council. "Opening a door to make someone else's dream possible – there's a lot of satisfaction in that."

"I came back to my origins, having grown up in a neighborhood a couple of blocks from the Rio Grande Theatre. There were no opportunities like music lessons and other fun artistic things when I was growing up. I want to see more programs available for local children and the office of executive director provides avenues for making that happen."

David Salcido, manager of the Rio Grande Theatre, shares Ceci's commitment. A graduate of New Mexico State University, David grew up in Tularosa. "I believe in the arts as something that can change lives. When I was in high school, it was band and theatre that helped me realize my capabilities, that convinced me that my active love for creating beauty out of ordinary materials would compel me to rise up and achieve something greater for myself."

"The arts always provide opportunities," David states. "I search for every possibility for showcasing and promoting the arts in Las Cruces, whether it'd be at the grade school level or through established organizations struggling to create a better place for us to live." "This region is an artist's paradise – an inspiration. We have several very active theatre companies here, new art galleries are opening every month, there is a growing and boisterous film community taking root, we have arts festivals cropping up and becoming annual events and the attendance at the Rio Grande Theatre has almost tripled from what it was two and a half years ago."

Ceci adds, "The pool of artists, sculptors and writers here is exceptional. Part of our job is to give these individuals and groups an opportunity to present their work and prove that the

quality rivals that of anywhere in the country – that's one of our goals."

"The economy, of course, is a huge issue," Ceci continues. "Everybody is struggling and it creates a domino effect, especially for non-profit groups. Unfortunately, the arts tend to be the first thing to be cut and the last thing on the list for donations. Yet the arts are so important to the well-being of a community – the reason many people move to a particular community. Having said that, we are fortunate that the people and businesses of this area are extremely generous and continue to support the arts to the extent they can, in both funding and in-kind help."

Regarding the political arena, David challenges public figures "to wake up and realize that when the arts disappear from our schools and our communities, hope dies for many who may not have any other form of escape from the doldrums of their everyday existence. But while state and federal funding is being slashed, here in Las Cruces the political leaders seem to get it. None of what we have accomplished could really be happening if the region weren't supportive of the arts and I think a great amount of kudos needs to go out to the city leaders for making the kind of choices that allow the arts to survive and grow."

The Doña Ana Arts Council is involved with a broad spectrum of arts-related projects. Among the major ones, the 40th annual **Renaissance Arts Faire** in November draws artist vendors from all over the country and provides an opportunity for a variety of arts-related groups to showcase area talent. In March, the **Arts Fair** is a juried event promoting collectable fine art and **Color Las Cruces**, held in September, is a plein air competition and arts festival, the proceeds of which support **Career Art Path**, one of the Arts Council's youth programs.

Established in 1971, the Arts Council was instrumental in renovating and resurrecting the historic Rio Grande Theatre through the generosity of the

previous owners, the Seale sisters. Now the home of the Doña Ana Arts Council, the Rio Grande Theatre, is a gemstone venue where the arts and entertainment come to life. "It may not be the lifeblood of the community," David contends, "but it does serve a very important purpose, particularly in a time when money is short and live entertainment is slowly being supplanted by instant access technology. Why should anybody have to go out and pay to see a live performance – the answer is quite simple: there really is no substitute. It's real, it's visceral, it's unpredictable and it can bring people together in a way that no YouTube video or blockbuster movie can." In addition to booking national and international performances, the theatre hosts **Literary Open Mic**, **Howling Coyote Open Mic**, **Film Las Cruces** forum and **Every Other Tuesday** – stage time for local performers.

"I believe that if people, especially our young people, get out more – get away from their computers, their television sets and cineplexes – and come to the theatre to see some of the truly amazing talent that Las Cruces has to offer, they will begin to understand the power this growing community has at its disposal. Las Cruces is NOT an average town. It is bristling with creative energies and talent."

Creative talent and energy are obvious attributes of the Arts Council's leadership. Ceci, who graduated from New Mexico State University with a degree in journalism/advertising, had a career at one of the major music labels in Los Angeles. She was involved in media relations, artist relations, corporate communications, government affairs, publicity for the arts and event planning that included Grammy Awards parties and events at the Democratic and Republican Conventions in Boston and New York. Her background strongly supports her current leadership position charged with determining what is needed by the community, being the voice and advocate between the arts and the city, providing the means to

Through exciting events, innovative programs and aggressive advocacy, DAAC lays economic foundations, provides administrative services, and assists in broadening the vision of the arts in the greater Mesilla Valley.



The Arts



▲ Jan Clute and Carolyn Muggenburg whose family donated the Rio Grande Theatre to the Dona Ana Arts Council.

bring attention to arts-related organizations and continuing the development of a sustaining business model for the Rio Grande Theatre. Says Ceci, "The skills acquired from navigating the Hollywood club scene, babysitting rock stars and working the red carpet have served me well in this position so far."

David also has a rich background that supports his current position responsible for the day-to-day operations and promotion of the theatre and booking and marketing performances. The upkeep of the historic adobe theatre is a monumental task he shares with the entire Arts Council staff. A freelance writer for a variety of entertainment and industry periodicals, David has been managing editor for several magazines and part of the coalition that started the highly successful First Friday Artwalk in downtown Phoenix. He performed freelance marketing and promotion for the major movie studios, and in Phoenix participated in the formation of a public relations firm, theatre companies, a performance space/art gallery and the troupe, Artists Theatre Project. Locally, he is involved with the Arts Resource Group, a board member of Mesilla Valley Musical Arts and Chair of Southern New Mexico Pride Board.

"I truly believe that a community grows in a positive direction," David concludes, "when it embraces its soul and the true soul of any community is the arts." ■

FYI

Dona Ana Arts Council

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2011 Doña Ana Arts Council



▲ Jewelry artist Ammu Devasthali is awarded the Excellence in Public Service to the Arts Award



▲ George and Maggie Griffin accept the Newcomers Award



▲ Honorable Judge Robert C. Brack is awarded the Art in Public Places Award

▲ Artist and muralist Rene J. Palomares accepts the Arts and Education Award



▲ Doug Roby accepts the individual Community Arts Award



▲ Dr. Jim Shearer accepts the Popen Family Award

Arts Awards

Article by Jessica Muncie
Photography by Bill Faulkner



► The Potter's Guild of Las Cruces was awarded the business Community Arts Award.

The roaring 20's were back in style, at least for one evening, as the Dona Ana Arts Council hosted their annual arts awards. The theme this year was "Puttin' On the Ritz" and everyone came dressed to the nines in dapper zoot suits and flapper fringe. The beautifully executed event, hosted by actor and filmmaker Mark Vasconcellos, was held on April 8, 2011 at the Rio Grande Theatre. George and Maggie Griffin, Rene J. Palomares, Honorable Judge Robert C. Brack, Ammu Devasthali, Doug Roby, the Potter's Guild of Las Cruces, and Dr. Jim Shearer were honored for their contributions in promoting the arts in the community. The late Dr. Tom Gale was also honored with the Dr. John Glowacki Lifetime Achievement Award. Guests also enjoyed an outdoor buffet dinner and live music, courtesy of The High Society Band. ■