



Celebrating the Return to In-Person Learning – and Working!

For the culmination of their summer camp this year, Zuni youth performed Butterfly, Corn, and Hunter dances outside Shiwi Ts’ana Elementary. They’d been practicing all summer for this, learning the importance of traditional regalia and even making some of the pieces themselves. Now they have a chance to perform in front of their families in an event that feels like a true celebration following a challenging year and less in-person interaction than ever before.

Schools, workplaces, communities – we’re all excited about the prospect of spending more time in-person with our friends and colleagues. Here at ONAPA, we’ve taken to healthy potlucks and



Post-workout endorphins!

group workouts as a way to celebrate being together again. Led by our health educator, Gabriel Gaarden, the five of us have been pumping iron twice a week during our lunch hour, working our way through a circuit of eight dynamic exercises each time. It’s a blast, and a very welcome break from spending so much time indoors in front of a computer screen!

Over the past months, we’ve appreciated how open our colleagues have been about how the pandemic has affected them. Above all, folks are sharing how they’re learning to prioritize mental health and self-care, whether it comes in the form of exercise, eating fresh fruits & vegetables, unplugging for a time, connecting with friends and family, self-reflection, starting a home garden, cooking nourishing meals, or simply being outdoors in the fresh air. So, let’s do our best to support each other in carrying this sentiment forward – in our work and in our personal lives!



Current & Upcoming Events



New Mexico Grown Week & Farm to School Month

Throughout October, schools, preschools, and senior centers will celebrate New Mexico Grown by highlighting local farmers and produce in classrooms and cafeterias across the state. We’re also rolling out Nuevo Thursdays this year, an initiative that encourages students to branch out and try something new! To top it off, we’re really excited to announce the inaugural New Mexico Grown Awards, a comprehensive recognition program that shines a light on the hard work of countless leaders championing NM Grown efforts in schools, preschools, and senior centers. Awardees will be recognized and celebrated at a statewide virtual celebration in late October. More details to come!

International Walk to School Day: October 6th

Join the movement that inspires whole communities to come together and promote health and safer routes for students to walk & bike to school! While October 6th is the official day this year, schools can celebrate throughout the month of October. Visit the website for resources and to register your school: <http://www.walkbiketoschool.org/>



Statewide BMI Surveillance

This fall, the Obesity, Nutrition, and Physical Activity (ONAPA) team will be partnering with public elementary schools and nursing programs to conduct annual statewide BMI surveillance as we’ve done each year since 2010 (last year being an exception). The COVID-19 pandemic has shifted the way we work with schools and community partners in addition to how we implement our obesity prevention programming, including BMI surveillance. We absolutely could not do it without our strong state and local partners and our BMI surveillance coordinator, Becky Joyce, who is managing logistics and scheduling as well as training nursing students on our standardized measurement protocol and the importance of collecting accurate data – thank you, all!



Ch-Ch-Changes!



Hold on tight, everyone! We're entering yet another season of transition and change – uncertainties of a brand new school year, shifts in the pandemic, new staff, and coordinator transitions in Colfax County, Socorro County, and Pueblo de San Ildefonso. Yes, it is a challenge to navigate through it all with flexibility and grace, but we've built a strong statewide team of highly passionate, dedicated, smart, and resourceful folks. Here at ONAPA, we're grateful to have partners like you to rely on and strategize with as we move forward, together!

Meet ONAPA's Health Educator Extraordinaire!



It's our pleasure to introduce Gabriel Gaarden, who joined the ONAPA team in March 2021! Gabriel grew up in Rio Rancho, attended the University of New Mexico, improved his Spanish language fluency studying abroad in Nicaragua and Costa Rica, and has been humbled by the beautiful people, cultures, and scenery here in New Mexico and abroad. After a degree in sociology and Spanish, he fell in love with plant-based nutrition and returned to UNM to become a registered dietitian nutritionist (RDN). Unlike most of his clinically-focused nutrition colleagues, Gabriel earned a master's degree in public health so he could dedicate his career to the type of upstream obesity and chronic disease prevention work that is the cornerstone of HKHC programming throughout New Mexico. Gabriel loves being a member of the ONAPA team and is thrilled his colleagues are willing to join him for high intensity interval training circuit workouts two days a week at our Santa Fe office. Feel the burn! Outside of work, he enjoys trail running, hiking, scrambling, and swimming in high alpine lakes in mountains everywhere. You can reach him at Gabriel.Gaarden@state.nm.us. Welcome to our team, Gabriel!

Colfax County Coordinator Changeup

Since 2018, our team has been fortunate to work closely with the dynamic Emma Green in her role as HKHC Colfax County coordinator. Emma has such a fun and welcoming energy that made it easy for her to cultivate relationships in her community and help us build a strong presence in Raton and Colfax County. She led a cultural shift in schools and the local built environment, bringing people together to collaborate on trail connectivity and introducing active classroom celebrations, walking clubs, and locally grown food at Raton's Intermediate School. While we're sad to bid Emma farewell, we're excited to work with her in a new capacity as the Public Education Department's Healthy Schools Coordinator!



We'll miss you, Emma!

Emma's dedication to her role included finding a replacement who would continue her momentum in northeast New Mexico. So, please join us in welcoming Elizabeth Hampl as Colfax County's new HKHC coordinator! Elizabeth is a single mom of two young boys, a Raton business owner, AND a skilled hammer thrower! Check out this brief [video](#) on hammer throwing and prepare to be impressed!



Elizabeth is excited about putting her bachelor's degree in community health education to use as HKHC Colfax County coordinator. Before joining our team, she volunteered with the City's Parks and Recreation Department, planning activities and conducting a needs assessment to help the City better tailor its programming to residents' needs and interests. In her new role, she's creating school and community assessments to measure current efforts, address issues, and track progress. Elizabeth doesn't have a lot of idle time – she also coaches the girls' high school volleyball team and runs Elite Athlete Academy, where she develops training programs for youth and adults.

And she continues to pursue her own athletic passion, practicing hammer throwing in Raton parks (she meets a lot of people this way!) and participating in hammer throw competitions. She even competed against the current Olympian, DeAnna Price, who holds the American record for women's hammer throwing! Welcome, Elizabeth, we look forward to working with you and seeing the lasting changes you'll make in Colfax County!

Back Into the Fold

In keeping with the theme of transition and change, we're thrilled to welcome Socorro County back into the HKHC fold under the able leadership of James McNeil, former HKHC Socorro County coordinator! James has since become the City's recreation director and is bringing two new folks on board to co-coordinate HKHC healthy eating and physical activity efforts in Socorro County. We're excited to work with James again and onboard our new coordinators!

Farewell, Martha!

Martha Cooke left her role as HKHC San Ildefonso Pueblo coordinator in late July to pursue new opportunities. During her six-year tenure as coordinator, Martha and her partners accomplished so much in support of health and wellness in San Ildefonso. Our team is fortunate to have worked with and learned from you over the years, Martha, and we wish you all the best in your future endeavors! We plan to welcome a new HKHC coordinator in San Ildefonso soon – stay tuned.

Students Thrive with Social & Emotional Support

Learning to read and write, perform basic arithmetic, think logically, and apply science are fundamental tenets of education. The acquisition of academic knowledge and skills, however, does not foster all the necessary abilities children and adults need to live healthy and successful lives. Social and emotional learning (SEL) helps fill the gaps in traditional academic learning by prioritizing the deeper psychological, emotional, and social development that is integral to building positive self-image, managing emotions, dealing with conflict, maintaining relationships, working together for a shared goal, and making communities stronger.

In Colfax County, fifth-grade teacher Diana Martinez knew her focus on SEL would be even more critical during a school year upended by the pandemic. Following the theme "Rise Above," she led class discussions where students could share their feelings and experiences, what their blessings were, and how they could spread positivity to others. "There was so much unknown and so much unsettling, and it was extra important to build relationships and practice those social-emotional skills," she said. "There was a connection between us; it was almost like we were a little family." So, it wasn't too surprising when her fifth-grade class at Raton Intermediate School excelled in their end-of-year testing. "For me, it's a no-brainer," said Martinez. "If students are not healthy – physically and emotionally – they are not going to learn and push themselves forward."

More than two decades of research proves that social and emotional development enhances students' behavior and academic performance, and New Mexico school districts should include and integrate SEL into their required wellness policies that HKHC coordinators help to facilitate and support.



Raton Intermediate fifth-grade students

To reward students for persevering through their school year, the class painted rocks with inspirational messages. Current and former HKHC Colfax County coordinators, Elizabeth Hampl and Emma Green, joined them as they walked around town for a couple of hours to place their kindness rocks where people might be inspired by their words. Students took turns explaining what their rocks meant to them.

The fifth-graders focused their positive spirit on their school, too, painting a "Rise Above" wall at Raton Intermediate and clearing the area of weeds and debris. Martinez and Hampl are planning to create an outdoor classroom-garden area next to the "Rise Above" wall this year. And the project spurred the Raton School District to dedicate some of its federal COVID-19 funds toward creating outdoor classroom spaces with planter boxes at Raton's elementary and high schools.



Kindness rocks!

It's no doubt the positivity is spreading. A couple of students asked Martinez to help them form a Kindness Crew to make care packages to lift up other students and teachers – we can expect the crew to be in full force this school year!

"Positivity is contagious, and when kids feel supported and cared about, they are the best ones at spreading it," Martinez said. "Teach them how to be resilient and positive, and they will run with it."



"Rise Above" wall at Raton Intermediate

Community Spotlight: San Juan County



Justin Pioche, chef and winner of the cook-off, explains farm operations at Navajo Ethno-Agriculture

San Juan County, THE place to be if you want to learn how to support farmers and increase access to locally grown food in a comprehensive way! In just three years, a team of dedicated community partners – including HKHC and San Juan County Partnership – created several programs to help residents establish and expand farms, increased the amount of fresh food students eat in their school cafeterias, and established the San Juan College Harvest Food Hub to provide an additional local marketplace for farmers. *"Introducing more fresh local food to students through Farm to School and NM Grown programs is one of many projects that furthers HKHC's goal to create opportunities for healthy eating and physical activity where our families live, learn, work, and play,"* said Patience Williams, HKHC San Juan County coordinator. *"We know there is more work to be done and, with the support we have throughout the county, the sky's the limit!"*

ONAPA staff were fortunate to attend this year's 3rd annual Food Summit in July, which included three days of virtual training workshops, a local cooking competition and food fair, farm tours, and the grand opening of the Food Hub. Farmington's Orchard Plaza was vibrating with community members' enthusiastic energy as the cooking competition kicked off the in-person festivities! Judy Castleberry was all smiles as she looked on, reveling in the progress food access advocates have made thanks to the support of partners like NMSU's County Extension Office and San Juan County Soil & Water

Conservation District. As director of the San Juan Community College's Enterprise Center, Castleberry secured a grant three years ago to establish the Food Hub and hire Erin Havens as program manager. *"I love our farmers' markets, but if farmers are going to grow here, they need more markets and so we're making it easier for them to sell to schools and other places,"* said Castleberry, now retired from the College. *"We act as a middleman, hooking them into the food system of Northern New Mexico."*

Marie Johnson, student nutrition program coordinator for Farmington Schools and one of the cook-off judges, said she remembers a childhood spent sampling produce from her Grandma's garden all summer and wants more kids to have similar opportunities. That's why she launched an Earth Day Challenge for students and buys a significant amount of produce from 10-15 local growers for Farmington's school cafeterias. *"I know eating fresh produce is best for our kids, and we have to do something to sustain our local farmers,"* she said, as the three chefs prepared dishes with local honey, lamb, quail eggs, and two items of their choice from the Food Hub.

On Earth Day, Johnson worked with HKHC San Juan County and other partners to distribute 5,000 kits for students to grow cucumbers and marigolds at home. In front of an engaged audience at Orchard Plaza, Johnson presented an award to a proud third grader who successfully documented her progress transforming seeds into cucumbers.



Local food cook-off at Orchard Plaza

The following day, farmers graciously welcomed a tour group to their farms, offering early season peach samples at Kerby Orchards, explaining the process of setting up an organic farm at GCI Farming, and highlighting Navajo food traditions and preservation techniques at the nonprofit Navajo Ethno-Agriculture. Wes Medlock, program coordinator for the Northwest NM New Farmer Network, dropped by Lavender on the San Juan as sibling farmers described how they extract oil from lavender plants. Medlock facilitates lease agreements between specialty crop farmers and landowners, making it easier for farmers to expand their operations with more land. The program has 15 landowners with 30 individual plots in Aztec, Bloomfield, Farmington, Turley, Kirtland, and Shiprock. It's one of three programs in the county that supports farmers, including a labor-linking program that began this spring to connect growers with individuals looking to work on a farm.

Aztec's Growing Forward Farm is yet another component of the county's work to bolster local food production. The farm will be an outdoor agricultural classroom that works to reconnect youth and community members to the agricultural legacy in the region.



Local residents buy produce from the Harvest Food Hub

It's also part of a new farmer incubator program that teaches folks how to grow specialty crops and provides them with plots to start their agricultural businesses. Soon, locals can get sweet corn, pumpkins, melons, potatoes, edamame, and more at the farm. *"As far as I know, this is the most hands-on farm program in the country,"* Medlock said. *"It breaks down barriers for the next generation of farmers."* The key to making all this work in San Juan County? A network of partners determined to build on their successes! For instance, the newly established Food Hub is now seeking funding to open a commercial kitchen and offer training for people who want to start careers in the food industry. San Juan County is a strong model for New Mexico communities looking to improve local food connections and strengthen economic development in agriculture. We've seen what they can accomplish in three years – we can't wait to see how this work continues to evolve and grow!

Community Spotlight: Colfax County

The spotlight continues to shine on Colfax County – this time, illuminating the built environment and large-scale trail connectivity!

Sometimes it takes one key person to move an initiative forward that has been brewing in a small community for years, and in Colfax County that person was HKHC Colfax County coordinator Emma Green. Her work on trail connectivity started when a park ranger mentioned a long-time interest in linking a recreational trail in Raton to Sugarite Canyon State Park on the New Mexico-Colorado border. The conversation sparked a three-year process during which Emma worked with local, state, and federal partners to plan a five-mile, multi-use trail connecting the Climax Canyon National Recreation Trail in downtown Raton with Sugarite Canyon State Park – hoping to eventually create a link to Trinidad, Colorado.



Bartlett Mesa Ranch, private land needed to create key trail connections and outdoor recreation opportunities in the Raton area

Emma, who is now the Public Education Department's new Healthy Schools Coordinator, is so committed to the project that she's continuing her advocacy and support in conjunction with Colfax County's new coordinator, Elizabeth Hampl. "I think the impact HKHC can have as a program is really shifting the culture and climate of the community," Emma said. "Having a voice in the built environment created a shift. When HKHC started in Colfax County, there was a spokesperson to remind people that Raton was a place of possibility for outdoor recreation and trail connectivity."

Healthy Kids Healthy Communities is all about possibilities, especially when it means more people can walk and bike safely in their community. This project would accomplish even more than that – enhancing the outdoor recreation economy in an area rich with mountain forests and stunning canyons where black bears are common visitors in residents' back yards.

In the beginning, Emma spent a lot of time creating connections and figuring out logistics – with government officials, HKHC's Active Transportation Consultant Tim Rogers, and UNM graduate students, who helped to create a basic trail plan. Emma, a member of the City of Raton Outdoor Recreation Task Force, asked the City and County to add the proposed trail project to their Master Comprehensive Plan as well as their Infrastructure Capital Improvement Plan so they could apply for funding and be eligible to receive Capital Outlay dollars from the State.

To make the trail possible, the City of Raton is trying to buy more than 2,200 acres of private land on Barlett Mesa, which is adjacent to Sugarite as well as Fishers Peak State Park, a new park established by Colorado in 2020. The landowner is interested in the land being acquired for conservation and public use.

As Emma worked with partners, support for the project gained momentum extending beyond local government to the State's Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department, the newly formed Outdoor Recreation Division in the New Mexico Economic Development Department, the City of Trinidad, the Nature Conservancy, and the Trust for Public Land, among others.

If the City can secure funds to build the trail and buy the adjacent property, Colfax County's proposed trail could be one component in a regional trail system connecting the communities of Raton and Trinidad, Colorado. This expansion of public lands would be a boon for the entire area – attracting adventure tourists and potential new residents as well as giving locals a beautiful new outdoor recreation option.

In 2006, Sugarite's Park Superintendent proposed a bicycle trail connecting Raton to the park – we hope his vision becomes reality, with an even longer trail!



Axie Navas, Outdoor Recreation Division director, visits with Sugarite Canyon State Park rangers