

# Spirit of NM Award honors the ones who selflessly serve

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Dr. Michel Boivin and his wife, Dr. Teri Heynekamp, worked long hours at Lovelace Medical Center, treating patients critically ill with COVID-19. (Eddie Moore/Albuquerque Journal)

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After a pandemic-imposed hiatus, the Albuquerque Journal's Spirit of New Mexico Awards are back and 12 individuals are being honored.

Among them are front-line health care workers who labored long hours and fought fatigue to attend to people stricken with COVID-19, and people who worked to provide personal protective equipment to help stem transmission of the virus.

Also being honored are two people who acted heroically to help Albuquerque police officers injured during a shootout; a local chef whose talent has focused national attention on New Mexico cuisine; a pastor working to alleviate the suffering of homeless people; a woman whose compassionate efforts are helping victims of violence; and a high school dropout who later found that adult education was the key to a better life, and the program that helped turn things around for her.

All of them were featured in Journal stories.

The awards were created in 2009 to honor programs and people in our community who serve others while expecting nothing in return – embodying the very “Spirit of New Mexico.”

Award recipients will be honored at a May 4 luncheon at the Sandia Casino and Resort Golf Center.

### **Michel Boivin and Teri Heynekamp**

Lovelace doctors Michel Boivin and Teri Heynekamp had to work long, exhausting hours daily during the pandemic and deal with people who showed up sicker and with multiple conditions because they had delayed their care.

The married couple repeatedly watched heartbreaking scenes of someone dying alone, and loved ones limited to saying goodbye during a telephone or video call. And all too often they faced patients and family members who doubted the severity of the disease, some rationalizing that COVID was no worse than the common flu.

“The way that social media rewards disinformation and spreading lies at the expense of people’s lives has been unbelievably frustrating, as well as time consuming,” Boivin told the Journal.

Said Heynekamp: “There’s so much anger toward health care providers. There’s so much animosity. There’s so much mistrust. We’ve never dealt with that before.”

Despite that, they never lost their compassion for those fighting to stay alive.

Still, said Heynekamp, “it’s a lonely way to die.”

### **Buffy Mayerstein**

In 2020, with coronavirus sweeping across New Mexico, 35-year-old Lovelace Medical Center nurse Buffy Mayerstein allowed Journal reporter-photographer Anthony Jackson to shadow her for the better part of a week. The picture conveyed to Journal readers was of a single mother of three working 13-hour days while trying to balance the demands of her home life.

On a typical day, she might roll out of bed at 4 a.m., having had less than three hours of sleep. She’d awaken her children and drive them to her mother’s home so they could be taken to school and so she could arrive at work before 6:30 a.m.

At the end of her shift Mayerstein would return home and place items she carried into the house in a basket by the front door to be disinfected before spending time with her kids.

Her days off were marked by yard work and laundry. Sometimes she would drop her kids off at her mother’s home, where they could swim while she did grocery shopping and ran errands.

Unlike many working moms, “I can’t go home, take a shower and go to bed,” Mayerstein said. “I don’t have a spouse to have dinner waiting for me.” After a day working in service to others she still has to care for her own children. Unfortunately, there are days when, “I don’t have very much left to give.”

### **Christina Salas and Laura Kief Shaffer**

“Dude, we can help.”

Those were the words Christina Salas, an assistant professor at UNM’s Department of Orthopedics and Rehabilitation, wrote to flight nurse Laura Kief Shaffer, to whom she copied an alert from the Navajo Nation.

In April 2020, the Chinle Chapter government issued a call for donated masks. Shaffer had been in situations where she had arrived in rural areas of New Mexico to transport patients with obvious signs of COVID, but not enough protective masks to go around, so Salas’ suggestion to help resonated with her.

Shaffer, Salas, and Shaffer’s father, Craig Kief, director of the COSMIAC research center at UNM’s School of Engineering, hatched a plan to get funding and approval to use COSMIAC’s 3-D printers to create masks and face shields.

Over time, more grants were received and a GoFundMe page was set up. As of their last distribution in May 2021, they had made more than 15,000 masks, as well as 2,000 3-D printed face shields. They were also able to create 500 public service posters detailing the proper way to wear a mask. In addition, they had been able to purchase thousands more cloth and N95 disposable masks, surgical gowns, gallons of hand sanitizer and water, and 200 pounds of food.

Most of these items were distributed to medical facilities, home health facilities, McKinley County area hospitals, and many parts of the Navajo Nation.

### **Jaquelin Hernandez-Zarate and Johnny Garcia**

Twenty-year-old police service aide Jaquelin Hernandez-Zarate and 46-year-old tile setter Johnny Garcia didn’t know one another, but through circumstances wound up acting heroically to save the lives of two Albuquerque police officers injured during an August 2021 shootout.

Garcia was sitting in the backyard of his Northeast Heights home when he heard a commotion in the alley just beyond his yard wall. Police officers, he said, were yelling at someone to “get on the ground” while engaged in a foot chase. Suddenly, the pursuit erupted into a shootout.

Officer Mario Verbeck was shot in the neck, just above his safety vest, and officer James Eichel Jr. sustained a bullet wound to an arm.

Despite the confusion and ricocheting of bullets, Hernandez-Zarate, who had some training in the application of tourniquets and chest seals, immediately jumped into action to apply a tourniquet to the arm of Eichel, whom she called “my best friend in the department.”

Garcia, who moments earlier was enjoying a day off from work, climbed over his yard wall and made his way to the critically injured Verbeck, grabbed the officer’s police radio to call for help.

Garcia then helped to move the still conscious Verbeck to another location and out of harm’s way. Both officers have since recovered.

The suspect, a convicted felon who previously served time in prison for first-degree burglary, and who was shot and injured in the exchange, was later booked into jail on multiple charges.

Hernandez-Zarate and Garcia were subsequently presented with the Community Service Award in a ceremony at City Hall.

### **Chef Marie Yniguez**

To be nominated for a prestigious James Beard Award means something is being done right in the kitchen.

Chef Marie Yniguez is doing things right while simultaneously representing New Mexico. She is known for her many appearances and wins on popular TV shows and competitions, including the Food Network’s “Chopped,” “Diners, Drive-ins and Dives,” and “Guy’s Grocery Games.”

A co-owner of the Slow Roasted Bocado restaurant in Downtown Albuquerque, Yniguez takes much pleasure in having invented the Duke City Ruben, a slow-roasted corned beef sandwich on light rye, with house-made kraut, chipotle Thousand Island dressing and melted asadero cheese.

Yniguez is also known for supporting socially progressive initiatives and her involvement in charities.

In 2017 she was one of 20 chefs from throughout the country who flew to Washington, D.C., for the Plate of the Union campaign, lobbying lawmakers to protect SNAP, or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

Bocadillo’s has been a regular at the Roadrunner Food Bank’s Souper Bowl fundraising event, and Yniguez has participated in the Signature Chefs Auction to raise money for the March of Dimes, which works to end prematurity, infant mortality and maternal mortality.

## **Pastor Joanne Landry**

A longtime pastor at the Interfaith Bible Center in the International District, Joanne Landry expanded her ministry and community commitment by opening the Compassion Services Center in an old portable classroom across the street from her church.

The day shelter provides homeless clients with meals, outdoor camping showers and a few hours of respite from the streets. She later expanded the shelter's services by opening it at night for people who had been weathering nighttime winter temperatures at nearby Phil Chacon Park. Because only 25 people could be accommodated, those too late to secure a cot were provided blankets, gloves and other essentials to help them stay warm.

Landry intimately understands the personal struggles of some of her drug addicted clients. She is a recovered alcohol and methamphetamine addict; but that doesn't stop her from banning clients who use substances on the property of the shelter.

President of the Trumbull Village Neighborhood Association, Landry said she hopes to make her shelter a pass-through on the way to more stable accommodations, and actively works to get her clients on housing waiting lists.

## **Ashley Solano**

As part of the Journal's ongoing Literacy Project, readers were introduced to Ashley Solano, who at age 16 dropped out of high school in her sophomore year, but later found raising her level of literacy through adult education was the key to a more fulfilling life.

Solano had been married with four children. Her husband insisted that she be a stay-at-home mom, but the income from his job was not enough to pay the bills, and even with supplemental public aid "our phone and electricity were constantly being disconnected, and we were constantly getting evicted and having to move," she recalled.

Their marriage ended in divorce, after which Solano met her current partner and had two more children. Not wanting to be "the typical single mom living off welfare," she took two jobs – both at fast-food restaurants and both unsatisfying.

In 2016, she accompanied a friend to the Albuquerque Adult Learning Center for a presentation about earning a high school equivalency certificate. She immediately realized this was the path she had to pursue.

"I needed to change because, obviously, my life decisions up until that moment were not working out for me," she said.

Two decades after dropping out of high school, Solano has a number of degrees, continues to go to school, works for a bank as a bilingual customer representative and is on track to become a certified public accountant. She attributes her ability to elevate her literacy skills to

the Albuquerque Adult Learning Center, which helped her earn her high school equivalency certification and showed her that she could do so much more.

## **Gloria Rael**

Gloria Rael has managed adult education programs since 2006 and founded Albuquerque GED Inc. in 2010, which was rebranded as Albuquerque Adult Learning Center in 2018. The nonprofit, community-based organization now has several locations around the metro area, providing high school equivalency preparation, post-secondary transition assistance, and career preparation to anyone age 16 and older.

The organization has an annual budget of about \$300,000, of which two-thirds comes from the state Higher Education Department and federal pass-through funding, and the rest from grants.

“We schedule according to the needs of the students, so we have morning, afternoon and evening blocks,” she said. “We have one-on-one tutoring, but the bulk of teaching is done through classroom instruction.”

Instructors cover reading, writing, language arts, math, science, social studies and digital literacy, Rael said.

She attributes community partnerships to the organization’s expansion beyond adult education programming and into community-based sites in Albuquerque community centers and a new family literacy school partnership with Bernalillo County.

Amid the competition for limited operating resources, Rael says her passion lies in finding innovative ways to expand services to address unmet literacy needs.

## **Bev McMillan**

As manager of the Albuquerque Family Advocacy Center, Bev McMillan tries to make a horrible situation for victims of violence, including children, more tolerable.

The center provides free social, legal and law enforcement services to survivors of rape and domestic violence all under one roof.

Here, a victim can speak with a police investigator and then go to an examination room for collection of evidence in the same facility, eliminating the need for travel between a police station and hospital.

Victims can additionally access on-site showers, food, toiletries, diapers and clothing, including business attire for court appearances and job interviews.

McMillan is also active in The Links Inc., a nonprofit social and service organization in which she seeks to expose African American children to arts, gardening and how to manage money.

Summing up her efforts, McMillan said helping to improve people's lives is what really counts. "Because at the end of the day, your epitaph is not going to read how big of a spreadsheet did you do; it's more like, 'Did I leave a footprint in somebody's life that transformed them?'"