

A Woman of Distinction: Emma Jean Cervantes

By Charlotte Tallman '02

The name Emma Jean Apodaca Cervantes resonates throughout the community and New Mexico State University. It is a name that signifies hard work, philanthropy and making a difference.

Emma Jean passed away Aug. 30, leaving a void in our community.

In 1953, Emma Jean graduated from Loretto Academy then attended Mount Saint Mary's University in Los Angeles, where she obtained a bachelor's in nursing education.

Following her graduation, she began her nursing career and returned to Las Cruces to care for patients in her community. She taught others how to provide compassionate care by also serving on the nursing faculty at NMSU. As her experience and passion for health and wellness grew, she began to serve in areas that would ultimately improve health care in Las Cruces and New Mexico, including her service as the first female and nurse on the Memorial Medical Center Hospital Board of Directors, where she also served as chairwoman. She didn't stop there. She was instrumental in the creation of First Step Center as well as the Memorial Cancer Treatment Center in Las Cruces. Later, she served on the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of New Mexico Board of Directors.

Recognizing the importance of end-of-life care and compassion, Emma Jean joined a special group of people when Mesilla Valley Hospice was created in 1980. As a member of the MVH Board of Directors, she helped incorporate the nonprofit in 1982.

Emma Jean's pioneering spirit was also evident in agriculture. She served as President of J.F. Apodaca Farms and Cervantes Enterprises where she worked alongside her children and passed her love of the land on to new generations who continue her work today. Son Dino Cervantes says it's in his blood to work in agriculture and he feels blessed to have



Emma Jean Cervantes, shown here with her six granddaughters, was regarded as an inspiration to women in agriculture.

worked with his mother on the family farm. Inspiring others came naturally to Emma Jean.

"She was a role model for women in agriculture and was dedicated to building community resources," says Wendy Hamilton, professor and Cooperative Extension Service grants and contract development specialist.

Emma Jean supported NMSU throughout her life. In 1996, she was recognized by NMSU with the Philip Leyendecker Agriculturist of Distinction Award, one of the many acknowledgments she received in her life. Her work as a founder of the New Mexico Farm and Ranch Heritage Museum and as a board member of the Chile Pepper Institute Board of Directors also received a number of well-deserved accolades.

"Emma Jean was one of the original folks who believed in the concept of the Chile Pepper Institute at NMSU and was a founding board member," says Paul Bosland, NMSU Regents Professor and director of the Chile Pepper Institute, a

nonprofit organization devoted to international education and research related to chile peppers.

She also served on many other local, state and national boards, including the New Mexico Border Authority as an appointee of Gov. Bruce King, and the USDA National Research, Education and Economics Advisory Board as an appointee of President Bill Clinton.

While Emma Jean was a devoted and tireless community servant, her greatest joy was her children and six granddaughters, instilling in them the values of her own upbringing: faith, service and commitment.

"We learned that the real rewards in life come from service to others, and to the community where we have lived and worked for over four generations," says her son, Joseph Cervantes.

Emma Jean's legacy comprises a lifetime of accomplishments, values and relationships. It is a legacy that will resonate for generations to come as her children and granddaughters continue to honor her through their own lives.

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