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## Lifting Kids Up with Grace: How a New Mexico Community Built a Grassroots Youth and Family Center from the Ground Up

by *Gretel Kauffman*



Matthew Probst, PA-C, stands in front of the GRACE Center with center participants.

Grace was many things to the people who knew her: a beloved friend, daughter, and sister; an aspiring social worker; a cheerleading state champion who could be seen flipping through the air at football and basketball games.

She was a "spark of energy," as her mother described at a fentanyl summit in Bernalillo County, New Mexico; a "funny, charismatic, gorgeous" young woman who "made friends easily" and "was loved by many."

"The charisma of that little girl, it was just contagious," recalled Matthew Probst, a physician assistant in Grace's hometown of Las Vegas, New Mexico, who practices sideline sports medicine for the West Las Vegas High School teams. "She would just light up a whole stadium, you know?"

"And then she fell."

Grace was prescribed painkillers for the injuries sustained in her cheerleading fall — and eventually a growing dependence on prescription opioids morphed into a dependence on fentanyl. In 2018, at 20 years old, Grace fatally overdosed.

Today, her story is a driving force behind the GRACE Youth and Family Center for Everyone, a grassroots initiative to bring free programming to children, teenagers, and families in San Miguel County. Founded in 2020, the center shares a building with an alternative school for at-risk students and a school-based health center in the West Las Vegas School District.

"We were grateful to have a school and clinic for at-risk kids [in the community]," said Probst, one of the founders of the GRACE Center. "But Grace taught us that everyone is at risk. And so we needed a new center for everyone."

## Moving Upstream

San Miguel County, a county of 27,000 people covering an area three times the size of Rhode Island, has one of the highest rates of drug overdose deaths in the state of New Mexico, state health department data shows. In 2014, Probst and other community leaders, including San Miguel County Sheriff Chris Lopez, revived a tri-county collaborative to assess the community's need for stronger recovery and addiction services infrastructure. They found that local outpatient services were strong — but that preventive and inpatient services were lacking.

To address the latter, the collaborative sought funding for a new inpatient treatment center in Las Vegas, which will begin serving patients in 2025. But Probst, who lost his own father to a prescription opioid overdose, knew that simply treating addiction wasn't enough: To fully address the issue, the community would need resources in place to prevent it. He compares the spectrum of addiction services to a river: inpatient treatment as "the downstream" and outpatient treatment as "the middle of the river."

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"We knew that even though we had expanded [outpatient and inpatient services] so much, we had to move upstream to primary prevention, because it was just overwhelming," Probst said. "And we didn't have the resources in this little town to catch everyone who was falling."

To reach as far upstream as possible, Probst and his team turned their focus to the community's youngest members and reached out to the West Las Vegas School District. In 2012, the district had constructed a building for a

new alternative school for at-risk students, known as the Family Partnership. But by 2020 the building was only partially occupied, due to the growing popularity of online classes and an effort by the district to integrate more Family Partnership students into mainstream schools, and had ample space to house the types of primary prevention programs that the tri-county collaborative had identified as a need.

"I said, 'Well, I have a building. We need to do this,'" said Christopher Gutierrez, superintendent of the West Las Vegas School District. "There's kids out there that really need it."

As superintendent, Gutierrez had noticed a need for more free activities and programs for children and teens in Las Vegas. Many existing activities, such as youth sports, required participation fees or pricy equipment, making them cost-prohibitive for families who couldn't afford to pay.

"If you don't have something for these kids to do, that's the perfect time for them to be out there getting in trouble," Gutierrez said. "That's when we have the risk of them trying drugs or trying alcohol."

### **Growing the Center**

With space secured, the GRACE Center was born. The team set about bringing programs that existed in larger cities like Santa Fe — including Big Brothers, Big Sisters and the Boys and Girls Club of America — to Las Vegas.

"We went and spoke with their leadership and we said, 'We need you guys to expand here, and we have a free facility,'" Probst said. "'You move in rent-free. As long as you provide services to our youth for free, you can utilize this facility.'"