



Students at a summer Health Careers Academy.

The center has also incorporated homegrown programs, such as the HOMIES Mentoring Program, a restorative justice program that utilizes a mix of group discussions and hands-on projects in construction and other trades. In addition, the center houses several programs that encourage students to explore health professions: the Semillas De Salud "Grow Your Own" Healthcare Workforce and Youth Mentoring Program for elementary and middle school students and the University of New Mexico's Dream Makers Health Career Program and Health Careers Academy for middle and high schoolers. Career technical education programs have been further expanded to include programs for the construction trades, commercial driver's licenses, welding, auto mechanics, and the culinary arts. Other organizations providing programming at the center include the San Miguel County Early Childhood Coalition, the San Miguel County DWI Program, and the Novo Sonidos Summer Music Youth Mentoring Program.

"Now, you almost can't tell there's no school in the summer," Probst said. "When you go to this school facility in the summer, it's just as vibrant. There's as much going on as there is during the school year."

As the center's programs expand — the HOMIES Program has grown from roughly a dozen participants in its first year to more than 120 participants today — so has the range of programs offered. The center has plans to increase its farming and gardening offerings for students, and the school

district recently purchased a historic abandoned theater that will eventually house the cultural arts arm of the center.

"The challenge now is that we've outgrown the space [in the Family Partnership school building] again," Probst said.

It can be difficult to gauge the full scope of the center's impact, he noted, especially through events such as its now-annual holiday bazaar, which features games; giveaways of toys, clothes, vouchers for local restaurants; flu and COVID shots; and education on community resources. Over the last five years, Probst estimates that more than 10,000 people from the community have participated in events like the holiday bazaar and other center programming.

The biggest challenge right now is that everybody wants to participate.

Going forward, Gutierrez said he would like to expand the center's building to accommodate more programming: "The biggest challenge right now is that everybody wants to participate," he said. He would also like to see the center offer more programs for families and guardians in the future.

Finding 'The Doers'

Both Probst and Gutierrez see the GRACE Center as easily replicable in other rural areas. The first step, they say, is finding people in the community who want to help.

"Every small town has its 'doers,'" Probst said. "It can be the high school principal, the coach, the janitor, the person who teaches confirmation at church or drives the bus. There's a core group of doers in every community."



Community members attend a holiday event hosted by the GRACE Center.

After a call to action must come a plan of action, or a "playbook," to add organizational structure, Probst added: "You've got to be grassroots enough to be who you are, but have enough structure to be organized and sustainable. And that looks different for different communities."

Rural schools with declining enrollment numbers that have found themselves with extra space in their buildings may be especially suited to house youth programming, Probst noted.

Gutierrez describes the process of putting the GRACE Center together as "trial and error, as it always is." Between balancing personalities, finding appropriate spaces, and acquiring funding, building a center from the ground up can be challenging, he said — but doable with the right team: "It's a lot of hard work, but if you're there for the right reason and it's for the kids, it is possible."

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About Gretel Kauffman

Gretel Kauffman has been a web writer for the Rural Health Information Hub since 2022. She writes on a variety of rural-specific issues in the *Rural Monitor* and *Models and Innovations*. Gretel has a bachelor of arts degree in American Studies from the University of Notre Dame. [Full Biography](#)
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