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Fresh Plates
Myles Lucero Keeps Prairie
Star's Menu Shining Bright

New Mexico

MARCH 2026

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all their own.

HOME FRONT

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Taylor-Mesilla
Historic Site



Driving Force

Meet NMSU golfer
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Folk Life

Heritage arts continue to flourish in the Land of Enchantment, helped along by the unique bonds of an enduring apprenticeship program.

By Adele Oliveira

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Photograph by Tira Howard

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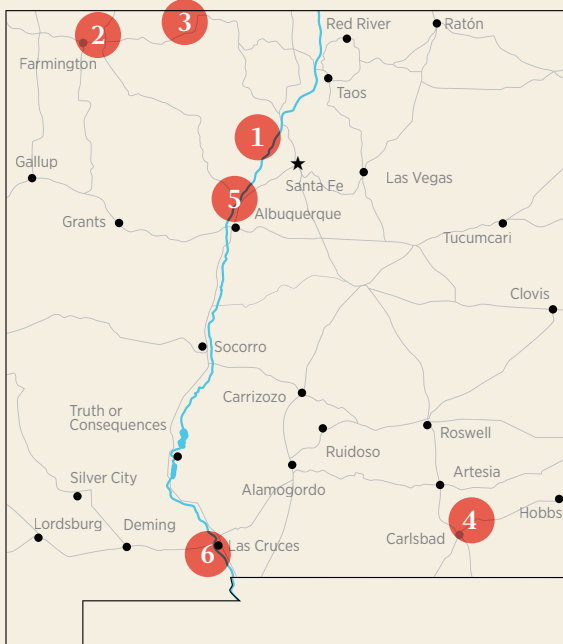
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FOLK

Photographs by
GABRIELLA MARKS

In New Mexico, heritage arts continue to flourish, many of which are helped along by the unique bonds of an enduring apprenticeship program.

Visiting with a few of these artist pairs reveals a wealth of individual knowledge, handed down with patience and passion.

BY ADELE OLIVEIRA

LIFE





Louie García mentors apprentice Allys Concha-Ortiz in his Albuquerque living-room weaving studio.

At the end of a dirt road on the yellow-hilled outskirts of Carlsbad, the door to Wagon Trail Riding Equipment, home of Trinity Saddles, is open to the warm breeze.

Walking into Rosemary Wilkie's saddle shop assaults the senses, in the best possible way. The smell of leather is heady: Bolts of it line the walls in rich shades of brown, tan, and ochre, with flashes of gold lamé and metallic turquoise. The front of the store houses tack, ropes, and saddles for sale. The workshop in back has a fiberglass saddle tree; four sewing machines; rows of drawers for tools and hardware; bottles of stains, dyes, and conditioners; order forms, notebooks, and photo albums; and a chain of saddle caps, marking each piece made in the shop.

Wagon Trail Riding Equipment is where Wilkie, who is 77, began making saddles in 1989. Her most recent apprentice, 22-year-old Wyatt Klein, will soon complete his second saddle via the Folk Arts Apprenticeship Program, a nonprofit initiative run by New Mexico Arts to ensure the longevity of heritage practices. Klein and Wilkie are neighbors; the former got into saddle making during the Covid-19 pandemic, when he and his brothers were stuck at home and restless and decided to buy some horses. After that, Klein went next door to Wilkie's shop, interested in making a saddle of his own. The resulting piece, a camel-colored sturdy ranch saddle, is decorated with a basket-weave pattern that Klein painstakingly stamped by hand.

Wilkie's start in saddle craft began when she saw an ad in the *Thrifty Nickel* for an industrial sewing machine she couldn't afford. Her husband bought the machine in secret. At first, Wilkie tried to learn using instructional VHS tapes ordered from *Western Horseman* before getting stuck and calling Billy Cogsdill, the only other saddle maker in Carlsbad, for help.

"The saddle was cut out in a different way than the video was showing me how to make it," Wilkie remembers. "I called Billy. He starts explaining it to me, says, 'Oh, I can't tell you over the phone. After work, I'll come over.' In 20 minutes, he showed me more and taught me more—I could have watched 100 videos and never learned what he showed me."

Rosemary Wilkie runs Wagon Trail Riding Equipment, in Carlsbad. Facing page: Wyatt Klein serves as her saddle-making apprentice.

The in-person transmission of skill sets from one practitioner to another is the essence of the Folk Arts Apprenticeship Program, which is built around the idea that the most specialized and precious cultural knowledge lives within people and communities, not in large language models, databases, or even in books. Personal instruction from a cultural elder is often necessary to convey the specificity of delicate skills, like filing an accordion reed or warping a loom with a pattern in mind. Via the program, apprentice and master grow to know one another both as people and as stewards of their shared practice.

Since the apprenticeship program launched nationally in 1974, most states have or have had at least one version that was created by and is funded through the National Endowment for the Arts with a mission to preserve uniquely American crafts. In New Mexico, the program kicked off in 1990 in partnership with New Mexico Arts to ensure the continuation of art found only here, like Pueblo-style weaving, as well as arts practiced more widely, like tango dance.

In the early 1990s, Cogsdill suggested he and Wilkie apply together for the then newly formed apprenticeship program to help further hone her skills. Their successful partnership led Wilkie to become a master herself. She says she's on her third or fourth apprentice via the program, in addition to having trained several family members—including a great-grandchild or two.

"Folk art isn't about selling things to wealthy people. It's about people practicing things that are important to them," says Amy Mills, New Mexico Arts grants program coordinator and





◇
“There’s always a place
for saddle makers.”

—WYATT KLEIN



director of the apprenticeship program. “Everybody should be able to be creative, to make beautiful and practical things, to be grounded in community and in themselves. That’s powerful, and we want to fund that time for people.”

The program provides each selected pair (so far, 270 and counting) with financial support (up to \$6,000 as of 2025) to buy materials, cover transportation costs, and provide a stipend for the master’s time. “Modern life is difficult, and the apprenticeship gives you time for opportunities you might not otherwise be able to justify, either financially or emotionally, without a program to help,” Mills says. In 2026, the program will sponsor 12 pairs, spanning uniquely New Mexico disciplines like santero art, straw appliqué, and Tesuque Pueblo pottery, as well as others like West African drumming and flamenco.

Many masters have taught more than one apprentice during the program, like Piro Pueblo weaver Louie García. One sunny day on García’s Albuquerque front porch overlooking the Manzano Mountains, long skeins of yarn hang from vigas to dry in the open air. Inside, García’s weaving studio is cordoned off in one section of his living room with low indoor fencing—in addition to his human family, García lives with a small army of Chihuahua mixes and a macaw. The focal point is an upright floor loom he made himself, attached to the ceiling and anchored to the floor in emulation of traditional Pueblo looms found in kivas, which hung from ceiling beams.

Raised in Albuquerque, García first learned Pueblo weaving techniques from his grandfather, who passed away when García was nine. During college at the University of New Mexico, García took advantage of academic libraries to research Pueblo weaving. “I realized that I wanted to connect as much as I could with the ancestral techniques and traditions,” he

says. Now a high school English teacher, García spends his off-hours working on private weaving commissions for ceremonial items like belts and embroidered kilts. Having established himself as a force in the close-knit world of Pueblo weaving, he began teaching a series of workshops at the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center about 15 years ago. That led to weaving classes and demonstrations for organizations like the School for Advanced Research, in Santa Fe, and the Heard Museum, in Phoenix. He also established the Pueblo Fiber Arts Guild, which he describes as the only organization by and for Pueblo artists, and the accompanying annual Pueblo Fiber Arts Show, which takes place at the Poeh Cultural Center in Pojoaque Pueblo each May.

“Because [weaving] is very time-consuming and highly specialized, it really requires a lifetime apprenticeship,” García says. “Anything we do culturally as Pueblo people requires time, resources, and energy. We’re constantly having to divide our time between academics or professional careers with our passion for maintaining our traditional art forms. It would be easy to forget all that, to live the White American lifestyle and not have to worry about these things. But so many of us put a great deal of importance and value on our traditions because we’re well aware of the consequences of losing our cultural identity.”

García works with a spectrum of fibers, from the color-saturated acrylics that became popular

Louie García and Allysa Concha-Ortiz work on Pueblo weavings. Facing page: Concha-Ortiz dyes wool with indigo.

among Pueblo weavers after the Industrial Revolution and railroad boom to upland Hopi short-staple cotton, grown in his backyard from heritage seeds dating back 500 years. García explains how, pre-Spanish conquest, Hopi Pueblo and many pueblos along the Río Grande grew acres upon acres of the cotton. Because of Hopi's relative isolation, fiber arts were less impacted there by Spanish colonialism than they were in the Río Grande region. One cudgel of conquest was forcing tribes to spin and weave wool and cotton as tribute. The association with oppression, García explains, led to the decline of weaving arts.

He also describes how later, during the Native boarding school era of the late 19th and 20th centuries, when many Indigenous children were forced from their homes to attend government schools and often punished for instances of cultural expression, gender norms dictated that only girls learned fiber arts, while boys were shuttled into woodshop and auto mechanics. (Traditionally, with a few exceptions, Pueblo weavers were men for reasons having to do with Pueblo religion.)

García says his mission is to preserve Pueblo weaving and share his knowledge with students who share his cultural background and who are aligned in terms of their values and philosophy. He met his current apprentice, Taos Pueblo member Allysa Concha-Ortiz, at a weaving class he taught in Taos last year. García told her about the apprenticeship program.

Concha-Ortiz says she almost happened into weaving. She's used to working with her hands, slowly and intentionally, whether at her day job at a chocolate shop or baking sourdough bread and foraging ingredients for her brother Johnny Ortiz-Concha's Shed Project, a series of curated dinners. Still, when it comes to the art of weaving, "There's been a few things that I haven't been as natural at learning," Concha-Ortiz says. "Like this last session, we were combing the raw wool, and I could not get it. He's very patient and will continue to teach it and give me tips on how to do it differently and how to do it better." She also enjoys García's willingness to share his knowledge, no matter what she asks. "I don't think there's ever been a question I've asked him that he couldn't answer," she says.

The apprenticeship program is designed for practitioners who've already demonstrated some aptitude—and more importantly, commitment—to their chosen art. Concha-Ortiz remembers seeing regalia, especially belts, when she was a child in and around Taos Pueblo, but not having any of her own or knowing how to make them. Weaving, she says, allows her to make her own regalia and imparts a deeper sense of belonging.

"I'll be able to provide my daughter with belts," she adds. "That's special."

For her project with García, Concha-Ortiz plans to use wool from her brother's flock of Churro sheep (hopefully, enough for a manta) and dyes made from wild plants she forages, like chokecherry. "My goal in life is to do things as closely as I can with nature and with what we have here," she says.

While Pueblo weaving could not be more New Mexico-specific, the apprenticeships encompass international disciplines too. In Los Alamos, the walls of musician and retired mechanical engineer Tony Tomei's basement accordion studio are lined with tae kwon do black belts, pictures of his childhood heroes (Roy Rogers, Captain James T. Kirk), and skiing memorabilia. Tomei grew up in Pennsylvania's coal mining country and attended college at New Mexico Tech, in Socorro. One day in 1966, during the fall of his freshman year, he heard unusual noises coming from the gymnasium.

"It was beautiful music, a kind I hadn't heard before," Tomei says. "It was international dancing: German, Italian, Romanian, and Slovenian. I got hooked and became quite an avid dancer." Not long after, Tomei bought an accordion from an Albuquerque pawn shop and brought it home to Mount Pleasant on school breaks. On one trip back to Pennsylvania, he met Mario Mosti, an experienced accordionist who lived a few towns over, and the two became good friends, as well as teacher and student. Tomei completed a New Mexico Arts folk arts apprenticeship with Mosti in 1993, working together even as they lived thousands of miles apart.





“I get a little teary-eyed,” Tomei says, when he talks about Mario. Their relationship long outlasted the apprenticeship. “He was the most wonderful man: kind, talented, so patient.” Tomei tells a story about how early on in his accordion repair career, he was working on the bass section of a standard accordion with 120 unique buttons and using a spare jig. The jig he usually used had a bottom, so the buttons didn’t fall out, but unbeknownst to him, the spare one didn’t.

“When I picked it up to make room, all the buttons fell into a pile,” Tomei says. “I never saw Mario startled or surprised about anything. He came downstairs and looked at the work. Then he said, ‘We can fix that. It’ll take a while.’ Took us a week.”

Tomei’s most recent apprentice, Antonio Maestas, is his third via the program; the two successfully completed their apprenticeship in 2024. Like Wyatt Klein in Carlsbad, a Covid-lockdown-induced boredom led Maestas to start playing with an old accordion. When it broke, the Albuquerque Accordion Club directed him to Tomei for repairs.

“He was like a kid at Christmas watching me fix it,” Tomei remembers. “He said, ‘I’d like to learn how to do that.’”

When Maestas comes to visit Tomei’s workshop on a pearly gray afternoon in December, the two embrace as old friends. Their mutual regard is evident: Tomei allows Maestas to answer most of the questions and issue technical demonstrations. Whenever he’s unsure or looking for confirmation, Maestas checks in with Tomei, sometimes with as little as a glance.

Maestas says he wanted to learn “every single thing” he could from Tomei. Since his completion of the apprenticeship, Maestas has been in the process of purchasing Tomei’s business. He says they pride themselves on providing high-quality affordable repairs for musicians. “I know what it’s like to be a musician,” Maestas says. “A struggle accordion players have is that it’s a dying art.” Still, when he began taking clients from Tomei for repairs, Maestas recalls a point where he had 25 or so accordions on his workbench, waiting to be fixed.

Truly understanding the accordion requires both technical expertise and musical artistry. Tomei demonstrates one dimension by manipulating the bellows: When they’re closed, the note is flat and tinny, but as they expand or contract, the tone fills with emotion, either jolly, melancholy, or somewhere

Antonio Maestas found Tony Tomei when Maestas’s accordion broke. Facing page: Tomei began playing accordion in college.

LEARN MORE

To find out more about the New Mexico Folk Arts Apprenticeship Program, go to nmmag.us/apprentice.

in between. Working on accordions, Maestas says, teaches lessons applicable throughout life: “When you open an accordion, it is so complex. My brother’s an auto mechanic, and it’s kind of like that, but also like being an engineer,” he says. “I hear Tony’s voice in my head: *How am I going to approach the situation? What are the things that could go wrong? If something goes wrong, how do I backtrack?*” It’s changed the way I think about things and my problem-solving skills.”

The masters agree: The most successful apprentices are the ones who are committed enough to their chosen art to incorporate it into their lifestyles and those who aren’t afraid to experiment and err, who manage to gather the fortitude to try again. Concha-Ortiz knows herself well enough to step back when she gets frustrated; Maestas innately senses when to check in with Tomei about a technicality. At Wagon Trail Riding Equipment, where Rosemary Wilkie refers to Wyatt Klein—and the world at large—as “baby,” the two remind one another of what the other forgets, shuffling through photos of past saddles and their riders with obvious shared pride. Knowledge that once dwelt in only Billy Cogsdill lives on through Wilkie’s hands, and now in Klein’s, still smooth and unlined.

“They’re not always going to go the way you expect,” says Concha-Ortiz of the learning process. “I think it’s better to embrace it rather than try and fight it. Even if I don’t progress very far or mess up, I’m like, It’s okay. This is learning.”

Klein is now working quickly to complete his second saddle before the spring, when he’ll enlist as a helicopter aviator in the Army and leave Carlsbad. He expects to live away from Eddy County for quite a while.

“I’ll dance around for 20 years, probably,” he says. But he doesn’t plan to leave his newly acquired skills behind. “There’s always a place for saddle makers. No matter where you go, there are horses, and someone needs to make and repair saddles for them.” 

Adele Oliveira is featured in *Storytellers*, page 8.

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“He was like a kid at Christmas watching me fix it.
He said, ‘I’d like to learn how to do that.’”

—TONY TOMEI

