

## Cultivating Land and Culture

### Ernie Atencio owes his life to the roots his family put down

in Northern New Mexico. He describes a time during his turbulent adolescence when an uncle who lived outside of Taos accepted responsibility for Ernie as an alternative to juvenile detention. Ernie's attachment to that traditional Hispanic community and way of life gave him a sense of belonging, helping him avoid the route to serious crime.

Ernie returned to Taos again 11 years ago to find his life's work protecting the land, communities and culture so important to his Hispanic heritage (he refers to himself as Chicano). As executive director of Taos Land Trust, he has found a place where he can have an impact on the fate of the landscape, use his background and understanding of the complex cultural issues to reach out to people of color, and provide an example of a truly diverse organization.

Diversity "is not theoretical here at Taos Land Trust," Ernie says. Because environmentalists are viewed as being uninformed about the history



ACEQUIA CLEANING / © Dorrie Hagler

and struggles of the land-based peoples of Northern New Mexico, he observed that conservation seemed like a divisive topic. Accordingly, he felt strongly that the land trust's staff and board should

"reflect the local population." In a state where 53.2 percent of the population are non Caucasian, that might not seem like a challenge, but Ernie says that as far as he knows, "we are the only conservation group in the region whose executive director and president are both Hispanic."

The way that Taos Land Trust is approaching its conservation mission reflects Ernie's innate comprehension of the cultural and historic barriers. "We saw that the low-income Hispanic farmers were the most vulnerable to selling out. Our most valuable lands—the irrigated acreage with historic water rights—were disappearing, replaced by big new houses. We felt we had to keep people on the land, and keep the land healthy and productive."

It was clear that these landowners were not in a position to donate conservation easements. Even if their finances would have allowed it, generations of distrust of government, and more recently of environmentalists, left a chasm between the land trust and traditional farmers. New, trusting, mutually beneficial relationships would have to be nurtured before there could be discussions of the fate of lands that had been passed down for centuries.

Thus was born De la Tierra a la Cosecha (From Earth to Harvest), a partnership between the land trust, the Taos Valley Economic Development Association and the Taos Valley Acequia Association. (Acequias are communally owned and operated ditches that bring the life-giving water from the mountains and rivers to each farm.) The partnership is dedicated to "sustaining the

land, water, food and culture of Northern New Mexico."

Over the past three years, De la Tierra has been inventorying natural and community resources, promoting local



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food, teaching about the connection between land and community, assisting farmers and ranchers with information and referrals, working to create policies to support conservation and agriculture, and linking area youth with experienced elders who are still on the land.

Through this work, Taos Land Trust is connected with credible entities with which landowners are comfortable, and has itself come to be viewed as a resource. In the process, the land trust has planted the seeds that could eventually lead to a conservation harvest. But there remains a gradual process of cultivation.

"It has been very gratifying to see how our collective efforts have changed the nature of discussion of land and culture in Taos," says Ernie. "We are helping foster community and have succeeded in reshaping the image of what a land trust does and who it serves."