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10 WHO MADE A DIFFERENCE

Touching lives onstage and off

By Craig Smith | For The New Mexican Dec 1, 2017



As a beloved middle and high school teacher in Pojoaque and Española, and as a stage director, Wendy Hassemer befriended and benefited hundreds of young New Mexicans — and older residents, as well — and has won a permanent place in many hearts. Luis Sánchez Saturno/The New Mexican

Wendy Hassemer's life is full of drama — roiling, boiling, intense and sometimes even comical — but she wouldn't have it any other way.

For years, the Medanales resident has channeled and burnished this special kind of drama, the sort that flourishes in and out of the theater, through Northern New Mexico productions ranging from high school musicals and plays in Pojoaque to MainStreet Theatre projects in Española.

children to seniors, in projects that celebrate the cultures and traditions of the Española Valley and give insight into the region's struggles.

Soon after her retirement from a decadeslong career as an educator, Hassemer co-founded the MainStreet Theatre, which not only stages several productions each year but also offers classes and workshops, summer camps for kids, choral groups, storytelling and poetry readings.

Hassemer, as a beloved middle and high school teacher in Pojoaque and Española, and as a stage director, has befriended and benefited hundreds of young New Mexicans — and older residents, as well — and has won a permanent place in many hearts. Her efforts also have earned her a place among the *The New Mexican's* 10 Who Made a Difference honorees for 2017.

"There are simply not enough good things I can say about Mrs. Wendy Hassemer," said Cory Chavez, one of her former students at Pojoaque Valley High School, where she taught for 13 years and served as a drama club sponsor, school play director and all-around mentor.

"She's one of the most instrumental people in shaping the man I am today," Chavez said.

He met Hassemer when he was 14 and a freshman at Pojoaque Valley High. He was cast in a small part in a school play — and never looked back. In the past eight years, he has worked with Hassemer on 13 productions.

"For me, her teachings went beyond just acting," Chavez said. "She helped me develop special skills necessary to excel in everything that I do. She's more than just a mentor to me. She's family."

Lanz Sanchez, a current student of Hassemer's and a participant in her theater productions, made similar comments: "She is not just a director to me. She is a mentor, a life coach, but even more importantly a friend. ... [She] has truly made an impact in my life."

Marlene Schwalje, one of several people who nominated Hassemer for the 10 Who Made a Difference award, said, "If a person's legacy is in the people whose lives she's touched, Wendy Hassemer's legacy is legion. Wendy's guidance inspires her teens to cultivate a confidence they never knew was in them, to discover the direction of their future and to find and use their own individual, authentic voice rather than become lost in the crowd."

Hassemer grew up in Santa Fe. Her start in theater came when she was attending a small women's liberal arts institution, William Woods College (now University), in Fulton, Mo., studying to become a teacher of English, Spanish and history. In the spring semester of her freshman year, an English and drama teacher persuaded her to be part of the chorus in the classic Greek drama *Medea* by Euripides. And that was that.

"I was completely bitten by the bug," she said — to the point of doing "three or four shows a year for the next three years."

Her forte, she found, was not onstage but in production work: stage management, lighting, sound design, building properties and, eventually, directing. She never took a formal theater course. "It was on-the-job training."

After college, theater had to take a back seat for some years, especially while Hassemer was working on her master's degree in English as a second language at The University of New Mexico. At UNM, she met and married her husband of 47 years, Dr. Donald Hassemer.

returned permanently to Northern New Mexico in 1978 and raised three children: a daughter who is a pediatric intensive care unit nurse, a son who is an emergency room nurse and another son who works in business.

Drama was always lurking in the wings for Wendy Hassemer. After two years of teaching at Santa Fe Indian School, she was hired at Española Middle School, where she was expected to sponsor an extracurricular activity.

A supervisor proposed a newspaper club. “I said, ‘I don’t know anything about newspapers. How about a drama club?’ And so there it began,” Hassemer said.

She taught for 11 years at Española Middle School before taking a position at Pojoaque Valley High. Though she retired from teaching almost six years ago and launched the MainStreet Theatre, Hassemer continues her theater involvement at the Pojoaque school.

She recently worked with students on the play *Discovering Amelia* by Trey Clarkson, which opened the weekend before Thanksgiving.

“The show is quite magnificent,” Hassemer said. “These kids find a niche in theater or in dance or in chorus, where they might not find one elsewhere. They have a passion in their lives.”

Does Hassemer see herself slowing down any time soon?

“I love teenagers, and I enjoy their energy,” she said. “They have a very particular kind of energy. They’re wonderful.

“I look at myself in the mirror some mornings, and say, ‘Wendy, you’re 70 and you’re still hanging out with teenagers. When are you going to stop?’ And the person looking back at me says, ‘Never.’”

If you go

What: *The Santa Fe New Mexican’s* 10 Who Made a Difference recognition banquet; the event, which honors 10 Northern New Mexicans whose volunteer work has improved the lives of people in Santa Fe and throughout the area, will feature tributes to this year’s winners and outline their work in the community.

When: 5 p.m. Thursday, Dec. 7

Where: La Fonda on the Plaza

Tickets: Tickets are \$80 each and can be purchased at the Lensic Performing Arts Center box office until 3 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 3. For ticket information, go to lensic.org or call 505-988-1234.

