



# Excellence Award Winners

# Roxanne Urquidez

## Behavioral Health Worker Award

Roxann Urquidez, LMSW, is a Community Behavioral Health Clinician (CBHC) for the Children, Youth and Families Department (CYFD)-Behavioral Health Services in Eddy and Chaves Counties. Roxann works with an exceptional group of people that focus and promote trauma responsive approaches. Through her work as a CBHC, Roxann advocates for children, youth and families involved in juvenile justice and child welfare. Roxann was recently certified as a Nurtured Heart Trainer and looks forward to educating others on the Nurtured Heart philosophy.

Roxann previously worked for over a decade at a non-profit HIV/AIDS community-based resource center in Southeastern New Mexico providing prevention and education information to the community at large and comprehensive services to people infected and affected with HIV.

Roxann loves her family including her three dogs and values the time she spends with them.



“Roxann will go above and beyond due to her ability to see the youth and families she works with as who they are. She takes a person center humanistic approach to with all she engages with.”

Heather has worked as a public interest lawyer since graduating from the Pennsylvania State University- Dickinson School of Law in 2012. After spending three years representing survivors of domestic violence in Philadelphia, Heather accepted a position at DNA-People's Legal Services in Shiprock, New Mexico. In 2018, Heather began working at the Native American Disability Law Center (NADLC), based in Farmington, New Mexico. NADLC is a non-profit organization and member of the Protection and Advocacy Network tasked with protecting the rights of Native Americans with disabilities in the Four Corners region.

As the leader of the Law Center's Children's Education and Safety Team, Heather works with a team of attorneys and advocates to represent Native American students with disabilities in special education and school discipline issues. She frequently provides training and technical assistance on the rights of students with disabilities to families and community organizations, including juvenile probation officers, CYFD, and foster parents. A large portion of Heather's work involves representation of Native American youth in the foster care system as their guardian ad litem or youth attorney. She is licensed to practice law in New Mexico, Colorado, and on the Navajo Nation. In her free time, she frolics on the beautiful trails in the Four Corners at sunrise and sunset.

# Heather Hoechst

## GAL/Youth/Respondent Attorney Award



“Heather is a kind, fair, compassionate advocate who is able to not only have compassion and understanding for her clients, but their families as well. She is an unbelievably tenacious and optimistic advocate for her clients.”

# Dennica Torres

## GAL/Youth/Respondent Attorney Award

Dennica Torres is native New Mexican who graduated from New Mexico Highlands University with her Bachelors in Business Administration and her Masters in Business Administration. While a student at NMHU Dennica was appointed by the Governor as the first full-voting Student Member of the NMHU Board of Regents. Thereafter, Dennica worked as an Adjunct Professor of Business Management and Business Information Systems before pursuing her Juris Doctor at the University of New Mexico.

Since graduating from law school, Dennica has focused her practice on defending New Mexico's youth with over fourteen years of successful representation. A strong believer in educating and rehabilitating children, Dennica has worked on several community service projects in addition to serving as a Board Member for the New Mexico Coalition for Literacy. She has helped her young clients navigate their delinquency cases and worked with numerous juvenile justice partners to develop and implement alternatives to detention and reduce probation supervision.



“Dennica is known to be a fighter for her clients. Whether in the courtroom or in out-of-court negotiations, she will go to the mat for the young people she represents.”

I was born and raised in Los Alamos, New Mexico. After graduating in 1979, I attended college at Eastern New Mexico University. From there, I graduated with a Bachelor's degree in K-12 Special Education and K-8 General Education and later I received my Master's degree in Special Education. After receiving my Bachelor's degree, I moved to Farmington, New Mexico where I began teaching students with emotional and behavioral issues at the elementary level. After five years I moved to teach special education students at the junior high level. Later on in my career, I taught reading and writing to general education students in a specialized program developed for eighth grade students who could not pass the state test to be allowed to move to the 9th grade. I retired in 2004 after 20 years of teaching.

I found I really missed working with children. One day while listening to the radio, I heard an advertisement about an upcoming training workshop to become a Court Appointed Special Advocate. That radio announcement opened up a way for me to work with children once again. Soon after being sworn in as a CASA volunteer I met the first foster child that I would advocate for. I now have been a CASA volunteer for nine years and have advocated for 13 children over six cases. I feel so blessed by God to have the opportunity to make a difference in children's lives through this program.

# Gloria Burkhart

## Casa Volunteer Award



“Gloria has dedicated her retirement time to continue to serve the children in her community. She is always ready to lend a helping hand.”

Carmela Romero (M.A) is currently employed at the Bernalillo County Youth Services Center as the Juvenile Detention Alternatives Initiative Administrator. Prior to her time with Bernalillo County, she was employed for 10 years with the Children, Youth and Families Department. Where she served six years as the Juvenile Community Corrections (JCC) Program Manager in Juvenile Justice Field Services Division and four years in the Protective Services Division at Statewide Central Intake. It was during that tenure she created the original edition of the Juvenile Community Corrections Program Manual for the JCC contracted providers in the State of New Mexico.

Mrs. Romero also cherishes her time as a relative foster placement for two amazing youth who are now young adults. Prior to her seventeen years of service with the State and County, she was an intern over the span of her collegiate years in New Mexico for various organizations such as Healthcare for the Homeless, The Center for Family and Community Partnerships at the University of New Mexico, Highland Human Services Collaborative and the Albuquerque Boy's Reintegration Center. Ms. Romero was instrumental in creating The Girls Are Great Group, a female gang prevention and intervention group within the Albuquerque Public School Highland District. Ms. Romero holds a Master's Degree in Family Studies from the University of New Mexico. Ms. Romero participates in the Bernalillo County Continuum Board and was previously elected three times as a Board Member for the New Mexico Criminal Justice Association Board for the State of New Mexico as a Juvenile representative. Ms. Romero has also received previous recognition to include a Distinguished Service Award from the DWI council in Rio Arriba County in 2011 and 2012 as well as an award from the Office of the Secretary of Defense as a Patriotic Employer.

# Carmela Romero

## CYFD or Tribal Social Services Leader Award



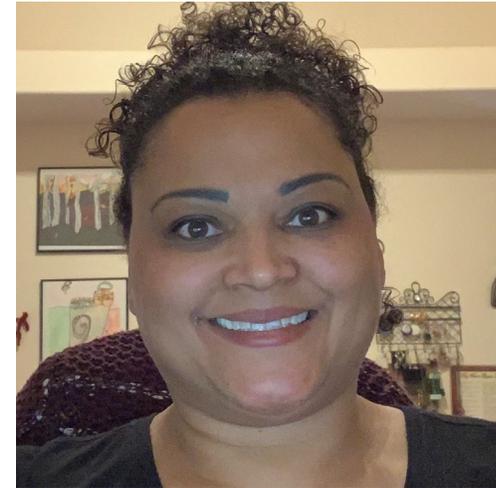
“Many juveniles and family members continue to this day to applaud Ms. Romero's efforts on behalf of the youth of our community. Although she guided them within the conditions of the court order and or mandates of probation, her efforts went above and beyond to help them manage the system and successfully complete the programs.”

I began working as an FCM Facilitator in January 2017. I have had the privilege to work with an amazing team who provide guidance and support both professionally and personally.

Working as an FCM Facilitator has opened my eyes to the necessity of community support and the resources available. I have seen several families throughout Region 5 gain amazing skills and build stronger connections within their family and the community. There are several families that do not immediately buy into the idea of getting help because for generations we have heard that, 'kids do not come with instructions'; however, working in this position and witnessing the incredible work that CPS workers and community collaborators do with families has definitely proven that while the instructions may not come attached to the wrist or ankle of a newborn, there are professionals who care deeply about the safety and wellbeing of all children and are more than able and willing to provide guidance and share their knowledge. It is an honor to participate in the process of helping to build a stronger community.

# Jamey Gallegos

## CYFD Protective Services Worker Award



“Anyone who knows Jamey knows that she advocates strongly for anything that she believes in. She is a champion of families and acknowledging that we, in the child welfare system, have the responsibility to keep families together and support them through their barriers.”

“Maria exemplifies the term ‘firm, fair and consistent’ and handles challenges with grace and empathy. She maintains positive interactions with the families and our providers in the community.”

**Maria**  
**Maes-McChriston**  
Juvenile Justice Worker Award

Shannon has been with New Mexico Kids Matter since August 2008. Her background is in Business Management and Elementary Education. She is passionate about children and their education. Shannon started her lifelong professional journey in the Military. She spent 15 years in the Air Force before transitioning to Elementary Education. Shannon is currently the CASA Program Director for New Mexico Kids Matter and has had multiple positions within the CASA program from its non-profit inception in 2008.

*“I think educating children so that they can grow into happy, healthy, and productive adults is something everyone in a child’s community can contribute to and have an impact.”*

# Shannon Eckert

## Non-Profit Service Provider Award



“Shannon's work ethic, professionalism, respect and appreciation for her colleagues and volunteers, and treatment of those in and out of our organization is exemplary.”

# Catherine Pavelski

## Parent/Guardian with Lived Experience Award

Catherine Pavelski is a Certified Peer Support Worker who works as a Parent Mentor with the New Mexico Family Advocacy Program in the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> judicial districts. Catherine works with parents whose lives have been affected by CYFD. She shares her own lived experiences with incarceration, substance use, domestic violence and separation from her children to help others who are facing similar situations. Catherine can offer a different perspective than that of the attorney or social worker. As part of her role as a parent mentor, Catherine provides support and a listening ear to parents, attends hearings and Family Conference Meetings, and helps them navigate the judicial process. Sometimes Catherine will also provide transportation, help with finding housing, applying for employment and other assistance and linking parents to resources. Catherine knows first-hand how challenging it is to get some of these supports and uses her knowledge and experience to help others find them. At times she provides support to connect birth parents to resource parents and helps with visitation strategies to help parents feel more comfortable when visiting their children in office settings. Catherine's goal is to provide wraparound support to parents to help them in achieving their goals.

In addition to her work in her local community, Catherine is also a member of the Birth Parent National Network. The BPNN promotes birth parents as leaders and strategic partners in prevention and child welfare systems reform. Catherine is also part of the Thriving Families, Safer Children initiative.



“Catherine remains positive, cheerful, optimistic, and not just willing but actively wanting to help other parents as they go through what are probably the worst days of their lives.”

I have lived in Torrance county for over 40 years and graduated from Moriarty high school, I became a teacher and taught in Estancia for 26 years I started fostering in 2013 after seeing many of my students being taken from everything they knew and placed outside of their community away from friends and other supportive community members. I wanted a chance for them to stay in our amazing town and school. Over the years I have had over 30 kids from newborn to 18 placed with me. My goal has always been connections with my kids and their family throughout reunification or adoption and I have stayed involved with them whenever possible. I still visit and support parents who have been reunified and the kids who live with me become my grandchildren. If teens choose to live independently they always have my home to come back to and of course, motherly advise offered for free. The downside, if you can call it that, is that my home is always chaotic, crazy but full of love. Holidays always involve extra tables and video calls from 6 different states. I would not trade this experience for anything.

# Dawn Kadera

## Resource Parent Award



“Dawn is doing an amazing job and has put a lot of time and energy into helping this child be successful for herself and for the community.”

We started our journey as foster/adoptive parents in Texas in 1998, and a year later moved to New Mexico. Over 24 years we have fostered 97 children, 9 of which we eventually adopted. Fostering is not easy- don't ever think it is or will be- but it has been one of the most fulfilling journeys of our lives. It is hard work mixed with a lot of laughter and tears. We are blessed to have seen the children in our home heal and grow.

# Tim and Tamra Gray

## Resource Parent Award



“Tim & Tamra are amazing individuals. They are driven in their family life as well as caring for the many children that come through their home.”

I grew up in the Philadelphia Metro Area, graduated from Bensalem Township High School in June of 1963, and entered the U.S. Air Force 9 days later. I only planned to spend 4 years, however, 28 years later I retired on 1 July 1991. Served on 15 different bases during my 28 years, retiring at the rank of Senior Master Sergeant (E-8).

Married for 32 years (end of January this year) to my wife, Melanie. I have a Step- Daughter who is a Kindergarten Teacher and a Step-Son who is a Mechanic in Michigan. We have 8 grandchildren. My wife is also retired Air Force serving 20 years.

#### Education:

High School: Bensalem Township High School and Bucks County Vocational School in Pennsylvania; College: Associate Degree in Business Administration from Clovis Community College; Bachelors of Science in Occupational Education from Wayland Baptist University; Certificate of completion in Fire Science from Community College of the Air Force. Work Experience:

28 years active duty Air Force; 3 years Substitute Teacher; 1 year Contract Firefighter in Turkey; 15 years Contract Maintenance on a Air Force Base; 6 Years with SCRB (and still going) serving JD 9 which covers Curry/Roosevelt counties and other counties when necessary.

# Chuck Hemphill

## SCAC Volunteer Award

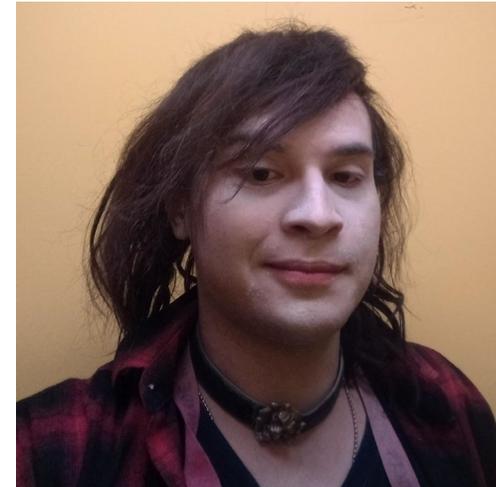


“Chuck is an amazing volunteer; he is always willing to participate in reviews even if they are not in his designated county. He’s trustworthy, caring, intelligent, and always puts the interest of the children we are reviewing first and foremost.”

Roy spent time in New Mexico's Foster care system and has been using his experience to advocate for issues that impact current and former foster youth. His strong advocacy efforts helped in the improving of legal representation for youth in care through his support of the Office of Family Representation and Advocacy Act and for making transportation accessible for young people by engaging in advocacy for zero fares on Albuquerque buses. Roy learned a lot about himself and others while researching psychology on the computer at a youth shelter the second time that he got placed in foster care. Now, he has spiritual parents that love him as their own precious child and they never use the fact that he's open about his feelings against him, even when their day has been bad and that love has helped him both feel better and do better (he lost 32 pounds since last April). Roy believes becoming a Research Psychologist would be a great, exciting way to give back.

# Roy Criddle

## Youth with Lived Experience Award



“Roy has stepped firmly into advocating for issues that impact current and former foster youth, all while working two jobs and maintaining stability in his life. He has shown great commitment to systems change by juggling multiple responsibilities but still carving out time from his busy work schedule to advocate for issues that are important to him.”

My name is Mariana Grajeda I'm 22 years old and a happy mother to a 6-year old. I currently attend Central New Mexico College majoring in Criminal Justice and I'm extremely excited to be here today!!!!

# Mariana Grajeda

## Youth with Lived Experience Award



"Mariana is a shining example of a ruthlessly devoted young person who is tireless in the pursuit of creating positive systems change. In addition to this, she is also a singular example of making the best out of a troubled childhood. She is strong and capable mother, and an exemplary representation of Youth voice."

I am a board certified child abuse pediatrician. I've worked in the field of the medical evaluation for child sexual abuse for over 30 years. In 1994 I started the Para los Ninos program at the University of New Mexico where I was the director and primary provider for this program. We provided medical evaluations for the concern of child sexual abuse.

I was recruited 6 years ago by Tse'hootsooi' Medical Center in Fort Defiance, AZ, Navajo Nation to start a program, the Family Advocacy Center. We provide emergency and scheduled medical evaluations for children, adolescents and adults for child sexual abuse and sexual assault. I am honored to be here and very happy to spend the sunset of my career on this wonderful land doing the work I love!

# Renee Ornelas

## Change Agent Award



“Dr. Ornelas is deeply committed to the children and families in the communities she has served and continues to serve, and we are deeply grateful to her contributions.”