

PERSONAL PRACTICAL GLOBAL

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A Metaphor for Possibility

TOM ROMERO AND EL MUSEO PIONEERING COMMUNITY WHOLENESS

by Marlon Heimerl



At Madeleine Allbright's presentation and booksigning at El Museo, from left to right: artist Gilberto Guzmán (whose painting, featured in the exhibit, "Gilberto Guzmán: Uncommon Artistic Outpourings of a Common Man," is behind); Madeleine Allbright; El Museo's president of the board Tomas Romero; and El Museo board officer Angie Gabaldon Shaffer.

Photo credit: Photo by Tom Mauler © 2006

Sweating under the sun for a dollar a day, 8-year-old Tomas vigorously chopped down thick weeds that dwarfed him. Down the road, his father, tired after a long day at the barbershop, worked to enclose the partial garage that would one day become the two-bedroom home for his wife and six children. There would be no running water, no plumbing, no sewer system — only an outhouse standing beside the square hand-built home on Fifth Street. It was a time before fashionable development in Santa Fe, when children played together in the streets and homes were built with bare hands.

The year was 1953 and Fifth Street was still out in the country. Few walls divided homes, and "neighborhoods were still neighborhoods. . . . Neighbors knew each other and cared about each other. There was a sharing," remembers Tomas Romero, now an exuberant 60, the volunteer president of the board-of directors at El Museo Cultural and the deputy cabinet secretary for the General Services Department of the state of New Mexico. "Lots of people grew up in that same way, so it's not like I'm such a special deal," he continues in his characteristically humble manner, still available for a cordial chat at the end of an all-too-familiar 80-hour workweek.

A visionary capable of intermingling elements of the past with those of the future, Armando Tomas Romero (a.k.a. Thomas A. Romero, a.k.a. Tomas Romero) is esteemed in the community as a man with a heart of gold. In the words of María Martínez, a member of the board of directors at El Museo and the events coordinator, the best way to define Tom is to look at him as "a metaphor for possibility." Indeed, his lively spirit and keen eye for possibility have shaped his entire life, eventually leading him to El Museo in April 1998.

El Museo Cultural de Santa Fe is a museum dedicated to the preservation of Hispanic culture and living traditions, with an emphasis on visual and performing arts, music, dance and New Mexican youth. It is a vibrant, grassroots home of creative expression for people of all ages and colors. Free classes are offered all through the week, and youth mariachi finds its home there. Adorned with evocative props donated by the Santa Fe Opera, a magical 210-seat half-circle theater stands in the heart of the 31,000 sq. ft. facility. Adjacent to the theater is a 12,000-square-foot space that houses the winter Farmers Market, dances and other large events. Visitors are greeted by an art gallery that changes shows every four to six weeks, varying with a chosen theme.

Relating the welcoming nature of El Museo back to his childhood experience, Tom reflects, "In that old community and in that old set of generations, people would welcome one another because that is the traditional Hispanic way — to be open, to welcome." It is with this Hispanic way of life, and with board members like Tom Romero orchestrating its development, that people of all backgrounds have found El Museo to be a home of creative celebration.

Sustaining El Museo's effort is the entire board of directors, including Cecilia Gonzales, María Martínez, Dianne Rivera and Angie Gabaldon Schaffer. Valdez Abeyta y Valdez, a member of the founding board and the first director of development at El Museo, took time from teaching a free guitar lesson to add, "The only thing that these board members don't do is walk on water." With the help of state funds and the contributions of its altruistic board, El Museo has catapulted itself into what many believe will become a cultural hub in Santa Fe's Railyard District.

Eight years ago El Museo took over a run-down, leaky, dreary liquor warehouse and refurbished it from the ground up with the help of volunteers. Looking back on the state of the building, Tom reminisces, "It was so bad that it was great. It was like it couldn't go anywhere but up. And the other thing is that the building wasn't new so it was kind of representative of the Hispanic population itself. . . . We're not new, we're not fancy. We're down-home. We're making do the way people have made do for centuries here."

Amidst his accomplishments at El Museo, Tomas has made many friends and has even been nicknamed "The Heart with Legs" by a writer's group taken in by the organization. He humbly accepts this name, seeing it, however, as nothing more than the result of being open to people, a quality that he believes to be infectious.

So what inspired this openness of heart? Born in Santa Rosa, New Mexico, on November 21, 1946, Tomas moved with his family to Fayette Street in Santa Fe when he was 2. Shaped by the welcoming traditional neighborhood on Fifth Street in which his family five years later built their home, and influenced by the Franciscan priests and Loretto nuns at St. Francis grade school, Tom decided at the age of 13 to become a priest.

During his high school years at the St. Francis Seminary in Cincinnati, Ohio, Tom's life as he remembers it was filled with music, a desire to learn languages, and an appreciation for the development of basic skills. Without the distraction of girls, he was able to focus his ener-

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With a passion for music, Tom and his classmates developed a love for the Beatles and anything that employed harmony. They would sing Gregorian chants following masses in Latin — synchronic voices mounting and falling — single-threaded tunes saturated with expression, teaching of the universal language of music. "You go into any culture, any language," emphasizes Tom, "and if you can sing something along with them, you've got a buddy. It may be rowdy singing in a pub or it may be church singing, but people just seem to have that draw to it, and that's why it's so important."

Complementing Tom's love for music was his love for language. He studied Latin for four years, German for three, and classical Greek. Although Spanish was his first language, he became fluent in English. Learning to value language as a means for excelling above and beyond his previous restrictions, he outperformed his classmates in English competitions. This marked a huge triumph for the young man from Santa Fe.

However proud Tom was of his accomplishments, trophies and medals were not all he gained from studying language. He acquired an insight into the value of communicating beyond races and nationalities,

A Metaphor for Possibility (Original in Word)

by Marlon Heimerl

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However proud he was of his accomplishments, trophies and medals were not all he gained from studying language. Tom gained an insight into the value of communicating beyond races and nationalities, echoing the Hispanic principles of acceptance once more. Emphasizing the importance of teaching multiple languages, Tom believes bilingualism is a pathway for transcending boundaries. That principle is evident in El Museo, where Spanish and English harmonize, and where Hispanic people say with enthusiasm, “Learn Spanish! Then we can understand one another on a different level!” Bilingualism at El Museo is more than a means of communication — it’s a way of life.

For Tom, visual art is another form of communication necessary for the development of an individual. All art is more than a form of expression; it is a depiction of emotion. “Emotions are just vibrations,” says Tomas, looking around the front art gallery amidst a spectrum of paintings. Likewise, art can be viewed as vibrations, evoking different emotions depending on the color and theme. It is because of this principle that El Museo continues to supply our city with a fresh dose of ‘vibrations’ every four to six weeks, offering exposure to otherwise unrepresented Hispanic artists in Santa Fe.

Underlying all of this, however, is the importance of the “basics.” For Tomas, learning to write and to work hard like his parents laid the ground for success. “I know that’s not ‘sexy,’” he says “but that’s what it’s about. That’s what drives you for a lifetime.”

Skills in hand, Tom believed it was time to leave the seminary. Despite his gratitude for all that he had learned, he reflects that in searching for himself, the hierarchical life in which he had become so immersed had begun to limit his growth. Returning to Santa Fe, Tom married at the age of 19, and raising three children became the focus of his energy.

He had planned on just finding a job after leaving the seminary. But his father said, “No, you go to school.” Respecting his elders, Tom enrolled in the College of Santa Fe where he pursued a degree in Accounting.

Upon graduation, Tom became a CPA and a professional management consultant, living in Santa Fe from 1964 to 1973. He then accepted the position of Budgeting and Accounting Advisor to the government of Bolivia for one year, relearning proper Spanish and connecting with Latino culture. Following this departure, he did a stint in both North and South Dakota as a management consultant before becoming the Deputy State Auditor and Deputy Secretary of the Highway department in Santa Fe under Governor Tony Apodaca until 1979. He then moved to Denver where he remained for 17 years as a management consultant before returning to Santa Fe in 1996.

“There were big things that opened up, mostly because possibility was there...” says Tomas, “My whole life has been like that... I love challenge. I never feel like I’m going to fail, even if I do.”

Carrying that attitude back to Santa Fe where most of his clients remained, Tomas discovered El Museo in the Railyard District. Becoming involved in the community in Santa Fe and Tesuque, Tom found himself ready to make a full-hearted commitment to El Museo. In May of 1998, a month after El Museo acquired its first formal location on the Railyard District — prior meetings taking place in restaurants and board members homes — Tom started volunteering at the museum, five years before he joined Governor Richardson’s cabinet.

Although no stranger to the political process, Tomas emphasized that he isn’t politically motivated parse. He explained that his affiliation with government is predominately need-based in the scope of the governments needs. By helping redeploy resources, and refocusing departments, Tom views himself as a “builder” rather than a “maintainer”, usually transferred within the government for restorative purposes when a department needs help or direction. However, Tom did admit that he was excited to work for another Hispanic governor who he thought would bring positive change to Santa Fe.

With an attraction to challenge and an ability to polish up departments of the government, Tomas began his work in Governor Richardson’s administration in 2003 as Deputy Secretary of Human Services. From there, asked to weed out kinks in the system and redirect assets, Tom moved to the Financial Services Department. Eight months into that job, in April of this year, Tom was invited to become the Deputy Cabinet Secretary for General Services where he remains today. At present, he participates in the state’s computer center, transportation fleet and many other areas dealing with infrastructure.

With Santa Fe quickly changing and with residential and commercial developments popping up like mushrooms in monsoon season, Tom looks to El Museo as a way of restoring tradition. Tom states that “when people build... one of the first things that [goes] up are walls and fences.” With the rise of gated communities, and the decline of the traditional neighborhoods of his childhood years, Tom believes Santa Fe has become layered, creating separation. Hoping that El Museo may act as a base for exposure, where people of different backgrounds may meet, Tom Romero hopes that people will be able to accept one another, creating diffusion and kinship between otherwise unknowing parties.

Dealing with themes of possibility, diversity, and hands-on activity rather than mere history, Tom Romero and El Museo may be at the forefront of a new era. “I think that we are visionary in that what we’re dealing with... is possibility. Rather than the ‘past,’ rather than just history, it’s really the present and the future.... We have 31,000 square feet. [That’s] ¾ of an acre accessible and available for possibility.” Truly as a “metaphor for possibility,” Tom Romero hopes to unite people and revamp the diverse culture of our city one exhibit, performance, art class, play, dance, and community event at a time.