

SOWING SEEDS OF LEADERSHIP:



New Mexico Agricultural Leadership Program Updates

Class 17 -Albuquerque April 2026



Leadership Scrabble



Our mission is to develop knowledgeable, multicultural leaders for New Mexico's agricultural, food, and natural resource industries.

NEW MEXICO AG LEADERSHIP PROGRAM VISITS CENTRAL NEW MEXICO CORRECTION FACILITY BY YESENIA PALMA

As part of a leadership professional development focused on Culture, Social Issues and Urban Agriculture, the leaders from cohort 17 had the opportunity to visit Central New Mexico Correction Facility (CNMCF) (located in Los Lunas) and learn about the institution's role in public safety and residents' rehabilitation before their return to our communities. During this journey, the leaders had the opportunity to tour the facility, learn about the intake process that individuals go through when they first arrive at CNMCF, and become a resident.

The NMALP leaders were impressed by the CNMCF's officers' professionalism and passion when discussing their specific roles in the intake process. Many of the officers have been working at CNMCF for over a decade. Throughout the tour, they heard about how CNMCF provides safety, structure, and rehabilitation to those who are incarcerated.

One of the most impactful moments of the visit was a conversation with a resident who was nearing release after serving more than 20 years. He shared his personal experience and emphasized the power of education in his life. He expressed that education and the opportunity to learn new things gave him a sense of purpose and helped shape his outlook for the future. He also mentioned that this remains central to his plans following reentry into society. His story offered a powerful reminder of the human side of incarceration and the long-term value of educational opportunities.

CNMCF offers many rehabilitative and educational services to help reduce reversion and prepare residents for life beyond incarceration. Educational services offered at CNMCF include GED completion for those who need it (and is part of their plan requirements while incarcerated) and vocational trades, dog training program, and much more. CNMCF is New Mexico's largest state prison. It opened its doors in 1980 and currently has over 1,050 inmates. The prison houses over 1,000 acres of Level 1 farm, with several units, including the Geriatric Unit, Mental Health Treatment Center (MHTC) (Male), Long Term Care Unit (LTCU), Reception and Diagnostic Center (RDC), and Restrictive Housing Unit (RHU).

During our visit, we learned about the New Mexico Corrections Department as a whole, with insight into their Adult Prisons and Probation and Parole divisions. We were able to see how they work to implement accountability, focus on rehabilitation and ensure successful reentry back into our communities. This visit really drove home for NMALP Cohort 17 the critical need for compassionate, educated, and systems-focused leadership to create safer communities.



DOES CLEANING UP YOUR OWN BACKYARD BEAUTIFY THE COMMUNITY? BY ANTHONY COLIN

It's hard to think of a more hateful and miserable group of people than Buddhists.

Hopefully it's obvious, even through the text, that I am entirely joking. Buddhist monks and nuns are practically the symbol of peace and relaxation in popular culture, and Class 17's visit to the Kadampa Meditation Center in Albuquerque did nothing to prove this stereotype wrong. The center's resident teacher, Gen Kelsang Khyenwang, graciously led us through a guided meditation. That meditation was relaxing enough to inspire a few micro-naps around the room. Everyone we spoke to was pleasant and disarming. Even the building's design left very little room for anxiety. Yet now, writing this article nearly a month later, it dawns on me that there was something ever-so-slightly disquieting about this visit. In the end, grappling with what unsettled me was a key step in connecting my beliefs about the world to my beliefs about what it means to be a good leader.



To understand what unsettled me, I will, unfortunately, need to offer the mildest criticisms of our gracious Buddhist hosts. While our interactions with practitioners of other religions consistently showed clear examples of community service, practitioners of the New Kadampa Tradition told me that simply spreading the teachings of Kelsang Gyatso (the late founder of the sect) was what defined their community service. Though I'm not entirely convinced this would fully satisfy me, I do believe that adopting more of the mindfulness and level-headedness they promote could significantly improve our daily lives. A simple drive on the freeways of Las Cruces or Albuquerque illustrates this. Beyond that, however, I've come to see how this insight relates to our class's focus: leadership.

Perhaps it's too obvious to spell out here, but the simple fact is that our moods and reactions influence the people around us, whether we realize it or not. While it's easier to see this in our personal lives because it's more intimate, our effects on colleagues and direct reports can be easier to hide amid the daily grind. Must everyone visit the meditation center weekly to meet their key performance indicators? Probably not. However, I do believe that regular reflection and meditation can help us respond better to difficult work situations. So, while I may not fully think that offering books and retreats is as altruistic as other branches of Buddhism, I am convinced that we can all benefit from the teachings of Kelsang Gyatso, as individuals, communities, and leaders. Staying level-headed isn't always easy, but it's almost always free.



ISLAMIC INSIGHTFUL VISIT BY CHERYLIN ATCITTY

When I started Seminar 6, I didn't expect that one evening I would stay up late reading the Quran and look forward to Ramadan, but that's exactly what happened. My visit to the mosque was one of the most powerful parts of the seminar. The peace and comfort I felt inside the space were real and unexpected. The Imam- Sheikh Dr. Mahmoud Eldenawi was knowledgeable and patient as he answered our questions, helping us understand the basics of Islam and how it relates to Christianity and Judaism.

Receiving a Quran and sharing baklava and dates were simple but meaningful gestures. The hospitality extended to us was humbling. They did not know who we were, yet we were treated with kindness, dignity, and respect. That experience stayed with me. After the visit, I reached out to Muslim friends to learn more about how they observe Ramadan. I was invited to join them in the future, and although I have not yet had the opportunity, I plan to visit soon. Even my family has expressed interest in learning more.

This experience reminded me that leadership starts with humility and a willingness to explore unfamiliar spaces. Effective leaders listen first and speak second. They seek understanding before jumping to conclusions. They acknowledge that faith, culture, and identity influence how communities see the world. As agricultural leaders working with diverse communities, we will encounter perspectives, traditions, and values that might differ from our own. The role of leadership is not to judge these differences, but to learn from them. When we approach others with openness and respect, we build trust. Taking time to understand enhances our ability to lead across cultures.

I am grateful for the opportunity to step into a space that stretched me. Growth often begins when we are willing to be students first.



ROADRUNNER FOOD BANK BY MICHAEL PURDY

Class 17 of the New Mexico Agricultural Leadership Program gathered for their sixth seminar in Albuquerque, NM, where the focus was on social issues and cultural awareness. The goal of this seminar was to enhance awareness of social issues specific to New Mexico and to deepen our understanding of different cultural and religious backgrounds. This article will summarize the group's visit with Jason Riggs at the Roadrunner Food Bank, one of the largest non-profits in New Mexico fighting food insecurity. The Roadrunner Food Bank distributes food to hundreds of food pantries, soup kitchens, and shelters across New Mexico by collecting excess or unwanted food from distributors, grocery stores, and local farms. The discussion began with Mr. Riggs giving the group a tour of their office, which overlooks a vast warehouse filled with crates of supplies. We also saw employees and volunteers continuously moving packages or sorting through produce to ensure quality.



It is well known that New Mexico faces long-standing issues with poverty and food security, but for many, the severity of these problems might be hard to grasp unless they have experienced such struggles themselves. According to the USDA, over 350,000 people in New Mexico lack reliable access to nutritious food essential for a healthy diet. While this number may be shocking to many, the Roadrunner Food Bank has equally startling statistics showing their impact in fighting hunger in our state. The Roadrunner Food Bank distributed nearly 50 million pounds of food in 2025, with 43% being fruit and vegetables.

Mr. Riggs guided the class through the extensive warehouse, explaining how each section is temperature-controlled to accommodate different types of food found in grocery stores. What seemed like endless rows of food filling the warehouse were all carefully organized and prepared for loading onto trucks headed to various food distribution centers. Mr. Riggs also talked about a common need among Albuquerque residents for a nearby place to find nutritious, high-quality food. This inspired Roadrunner to open a food pantry and outreach center right across the street from their distribution warehouse. This outreach center was created to allow people in need to browse through selected items they wouldn't normally have access to. They also have resources and staff available to help people apply for assistance through government programs. It was inspiring to see so many people dedicated to ensuring fewer individuals worry about where their next meal will come from. I want to thank all employees and volunteers at the Roadrunner Foodbank for meeting with us and for their ongoing efforts to end food insecurity.



JOY JUNCTION BY MARISSA DILES

During our visit to Albuquerque, while focusing on social issues and cultural awareness, we had the opportunity to meet with Patrick Hankins, tour Joy Junction, and learn about their programs and mission.

Joy Junction is a faith-based homeless shelter and outreach ministry that serves men, women, children, and families in Albuquerque. It can house up to 350 people each night, making it the largest homeless shelter in New Mexico. Their mission emphasizes providing basic needs along with spiritual and emotional support to help individuals regain stability and independence. Because they are a faith-based organization, they do not receive any city, state, or federal funding and depend entirely on donations and volunteers to carry out their services.

While touring the property with Patrick, we observed the different housing areas and learned about the programs they offer to help those at the center get back on their feet. Joy Junction has counselors, tutors, doctors, and lawyers who provide services to the residents. We also visited their children's center and business area. It was nice to see that Joy Junction functions more like a community rather than what many people typically imagine when they think of a homeless shelter.

Joy Junction is more than just offering a bed for the night or a meal, as their mission statement states—they are “providing a hand up to the homeless and hungry. With food, shelter, clothing, recovery programs, and life skill training, we empower individuals to re-enter the workforce and break the cycle of homelessness, one life at a time.”



A WORD FROM COLLEGE DRIVE

BY TINA WILSON

During our visit to Joy Junction, a young girl about 10 years old followed us around. Patrick introduced us to her and mentioned that she would start school the next day. You couldn't help but get caught up in her enthusiasm. She was so excited to go to school, which might be seen as a step toward a somewhat normal life.

The visit to the Roadrunner Foodbank was eye-opening. During our tour, they showed us items that had been donated but were considered ineligible for distribution. Note the vegetable soup on the right. It states, "For experimental use only".

A seminar in Albuquerque isn't complete without visiting Imam-Sheikh Dr. Mahmoud Eldenawi, who is always warm and welcoming to the New Mexico Agricultural Leadership Class. Each visit is unique, and this one was no different. He wrote our names in Arabic and gave us a copy of the Quran. I appreciate his willingness to share the Muslim faith and his warm hospitality.

We finished our Cultural and Social Issues awareness seminar with a visit to the Central New Mexico Correctional Facility in Los Lunas. There, we met a man who shared his story with us. It was inspiring, to say the least. He talked about why he had been incarcerated and how, after his release, he wanted to counsel young men to avoid the mistakes he had made.



Food donated but could not be distributed.

As I write this, we are just days away from leaving for Argentina. This will be my first time visiting South America, and I am very excited. When I think about what I am most looking forward to, I would have to say experiencing the culture and cuisine. After the formal portion of the trip concludes, I plan to take a ferry over to Montevideo, Uruguay. I read that I can expect to have the best steak I have ever had. I will let you know in my next note whether this is true.

Please join me in thanking Bob Mayberry and Caren Cowan for their dedicated service on the New Mexico Agriculture Leadership Program Board. At a February meeting, Bob and Caren retired from the board. We sincerely appreciate their many years of commitment.



NEW MEXICO AGRICULTURAL LEADERSHIP PROGRAM BOARD PRESIDENT BY COLIN MC VAUGH

I am honored to serve as the newly elected Board Chairman of New Mexico Ag Leadership. NMAL has had a meaningful impact on my life and career, and I am grateful for the opportunity to give back to a program that develops strong leaders for agriculture across our state.

I am a proud graduate of Class 8, and soon after completing the program, I was invited to serve on the NMAL Board. Since then, I have had the privilege of working alongside a dedicated group of individuals committed to strengthening leadership within New Mexico agriculture. I have seen firsthand the lasting impact NMAL has on its participants, their communities, and the industry.

Professionally, I am involved in agricultural real estate as both an appraiser and a real estate broker, specializing in rural and agricultural properties across New Mexico and the surrounding region. In addition to my professional work, I serve as an adjunct professor at New Mexico State University, where I have the opportunity to work with and mentor students in the College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences. These roles allow me to stay closely connected to landowners, producers, and the next generation of leaders, and they continue to reinforce the importance of strong, informed leadership in our industry.

On a personal level, my wife Tammy and I value our family, and the role agriculture plays in our lives and communities. We are grateful to be part of a network of individuals who are committed to preserving and advancing the agricultural way of life in New Mexico. As Chairman, I look forward to supporting current and future classes, strengthening alumni involvement, and helping NMAL continue to grow as it meets the challenges and opportunities facing agriculture today.

I would also like to express my sincere appreciation to retiring Board Chairman Bob Mayberry for his leadership, time, and commitment to NMAL. His contributions have helped move the organization forward in meaningful ways. I also want to thank board member Caren Cowan for her service and dedication. Both have made a lasting impact, and their efforts are truly appreciated.

I am excited about the future of NMAL and the opportunity to continue supporting agricultural leadership in New Mexico.

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Thank you to our sponsors. We appreciate your continued support of New Mexico Agricultural Leadership Program.

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