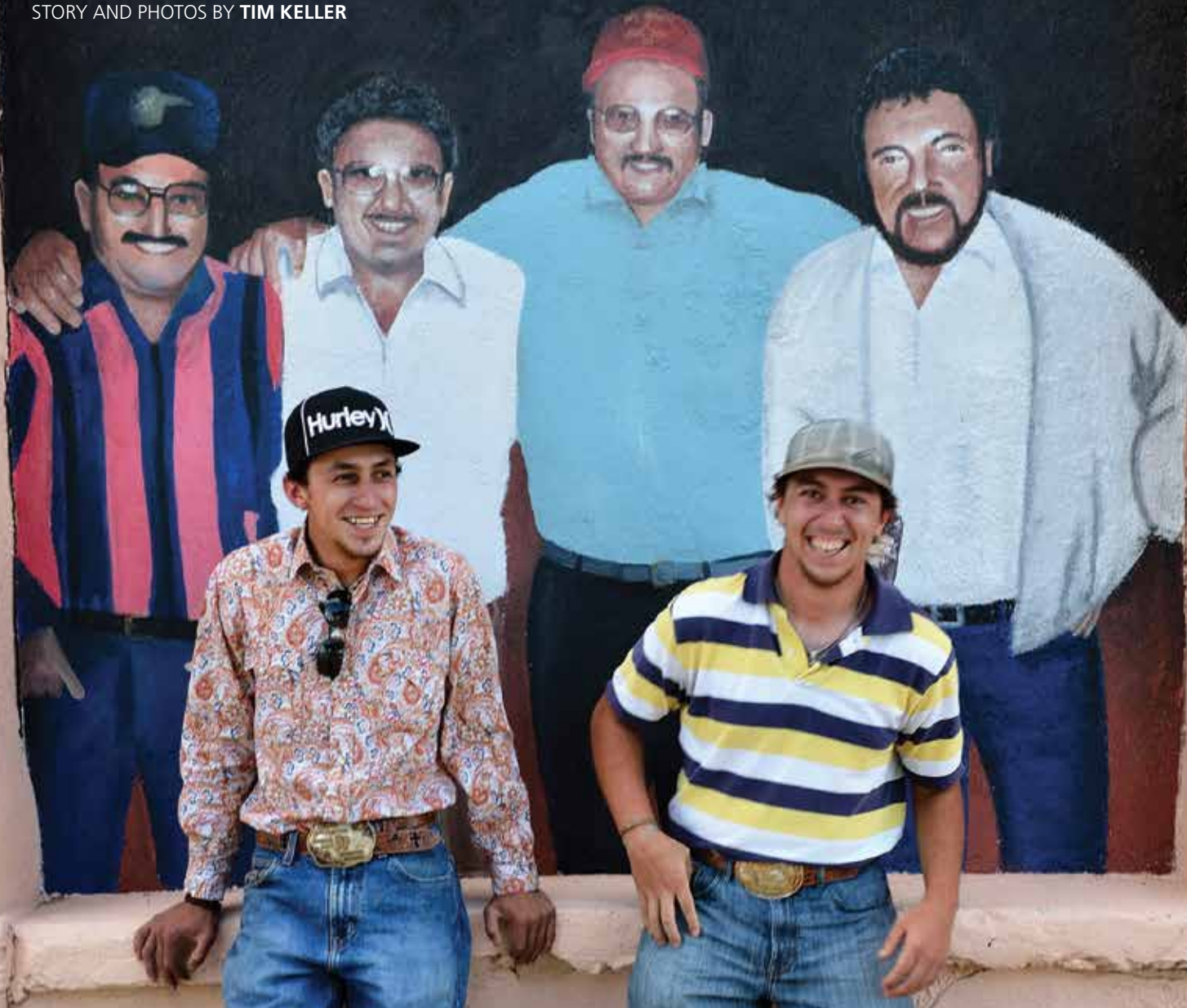


# Going Places Mosquero

STORY AND PHOTOS BY TIM KELLER



Aaron Martinez, left, and Gabriel Trujillo painted a mural of their relatives—Aaron's uncles and grandfather, Gabriel's cousins.

## Painting the Town

Murals enliven the remote ranching village of Mosquero, pop. 94.

**It'll stop you in your tracks.** Driving across the vast open grasslands and red canyons of remote northeastern New Mexico, you're passing through the Harding County seat of Mosquero, population 94, when suddenly you realize you've entered an illustrated world. Every storefront is covered in bright murals that breathe life into the town's past and its present. >>

# Going Places

True, few travelers traverse isolated N.M. 39 or reach Mosquero, but those who do inevitably slow down for the double take. Many reach the end of Main Street and make a U-turn for another look. They might even stop and ask around, and learn that every person on these walls has a name and a story. Some of them are still here.

The Paint the Town project was born in 2008 with a modest rural education grant to Mosquero Schools' state-of-the-art multimedia education program, which is called Roundup Technology. Staff sponsor Donna Hazen recruited artist Doug Quarles, a Louisiana transplant, to commute the 74 miles from his home in Tucumcari, where he's developed his own active mural projects along historic Route 66.

For five years, Quarles has spent a day or two every week teaching Mosquero students in grades 7–12 to make murals. Students repair and replaster the old adobe surfaces, select subjects and images, scale the images to the walls, and apply layers of paint. Historical figures and events are collected by the seventh- and eighth-grade students' ongoing research project, Primeras Familias de Nuevo Mexico, which has also produced annual books and a short film.

Gabriel Trujillo was a lead artist the first two years; he's continued to lend his hand since his 2010 graduation. "This project took us out of our comfort zone," he said. "We had to learn a lot of new skills, including communication skills. Painting on the street, I've spent a lot of time talking with townspeople and passing tourists."

Hazen added, "Locals don't spend much time hanging out on the main street generally, but when the kids are out painting, the street is bustling with people."

The village's businesses have donated



On Main Street, the wall on the right depicts the nearby Bell Ranch.

funds to buy paint, which costs up to \$200 for a five-gallon pail. One wall can swallow 10 gallons just for a base coat. The students raised \$30,000 on their own through various fund-raising activities. The project's biggest boost came when Roundup Tech was awarded a \$125,000 Microsoft Partners in Learning grant.

"Sprucing up properties has become contagious," said Bill Ward, superintendent of schools. "All around town, people have been out making improvements to their homes and properties."

Local rancher Tuda Libby Crews went even further. When she learned that St. Joseph's Church was about to raze its long-abandoned rectory, she bought it. After years of loving renovation, with furnishings and artworks gathered slowly from antique stores and flea markets, the Rectory is now Mosquero's gem of a guesthouse. "The Paint the Town project has been an incubator for positive change," Crews said. "It feels like one big happy family here, and everyone's going in the same direction."

Jimmie and Ellen Ridge moved to Mosquero three years ago, after retiring from the Air Force in Mississippi. Jimmie says, "We searched the West for a place to make a contribution. Mosquero's murals grabbed our attention. We were attracted by the vitality here." They bought and now run Town & Country Market, and they're developing a bed-and-breakfast that they plan on calling the Bunkhouse.

Their next-door neighbors on Main Street are Erma's Coffee Shop and Pat's City Bar, anchor businesses renowned for great food and atmosphere, but recently Erma and Pat Trujillo had to close their ma-and-pa businesses and move away due to illness; their businesses are for sale. A burrito wagon has opened for the time being; otherwise, people drive 18 miles north to Annette's Cafe, in Roy, Harding County's biggest town, with 300 people.

Mosquero sophomore John David "J.D." Chatfield grew into a lead role in the Paint the Town project. "It's fun," he said, sitting on a bench next to a painting of two cowboys, one of whom represents

his father, Jack Chatfield. "A lot of us come from ranches," J.D. said. "This project gives us freedom and responsibility. Doug teaches us how to do it and he's low-pressure. His motto is 'It's only paint—we can always paint over it.'"

The students had rich stories about the subjects in the murals, and they enjoyed standing for photographs next to paintings of their relatives. J.D. tipped his big black cowboy hat to an approaching tourist.

"It makes people happy," said Aaron Martinez, a head painter and 2012 graduate. "The old people get proud of the town, and the tourists stop and take pictures."

Looks like that paint was a wise investment. ❖

**Tim Keller**, a Ratón-based writer, photographer, and singer-songwriter, posts his work at [timkellerarts.com](http://timkellerarts.com).

Become a **Paint the Town** patron by sending a donation to Mosquero Schools Roundup Tech Program, P.O. Box 258, Mosquero, NM 87733.



## NEED TO KNOW

Mosquero is 164 miles from Santa Fe. Take I-25 N. 106 mi. Take N.M. 120 toward Wagon Mound (exit 387) for 34 mi. (N.M. 120 turns into Wagon Mound Highway after 24 mi.) Turn right (SE) onto Richelieu St./N.M. 39 and drive 18 miles to Mosquero.

If you plan to stay overnight, make a reservation at **The Rectory Bed & Bath**, in Mosquero, or **La Casita**, in Roy, which is 18 miles SE of Mosquero. Enjoy lunch at **Annette's Cafe**, in Roy, or pick up ingredients from grocery stores in either town to prepare meals in the lodgings' kitchens (available to guests) at the Rectory and La Casita.

## MOSQUERO

**Town & Country Market** 30-C Main Street; (575) 673-2930

**The Rectory Bed & Bath** Full kitchen. \$125–\$325. 10 S. 4th St.; (575) 673-2267

## ROY

**Annette's Café** Open for breakfast and lunch. Green chile cheeseburgers and Mexican fare. Mon.–Fri., 8:30 a.m.–4 p.m. 325 Chicosa St.; (575) 485-9616

**La Casita** Gorgeous western guesthouse, full kitchen. \$75–\$150. 150 Wagon Mound Hwy.; (575) 485-2559

**Ma Sally's Mercantile** Arts, crafts, antiques, snacks. 450 Richelieu St./N.M. 39; (575) 485-5599