



Just Plain Chuck

By Leslie Linthicum / Of the Journal on Sun, Oct 2, 2011

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SANTA FE – Chuck Franco was standing in line at the Dion's in Santa Fe waiting to order a salad for lunch when a working man in line squinted hard and started looking him over.

Franco was in a T-shirt and jeans, as usual, and his boots were spattered with dirt because he had spent the morning working in the yard.

"Sir," the guy finally ventured, "aren't you ... aren't you ... something to the governor?"

Franco is something to the governor. After 100 years of wives playing the support role to male governors, Franco is breaking ground as the state's first first gentleman.

A retired career cop who's as down-to-earth as a backyard barbecue and a beer, Franco is settling into a role that has no role model.

When I dropped in on Franco at the Governor's Mansion on a weekday afternoon, he was in jeans and a snap-button shirt and chilling out with a soda on the largest sofa I have ever seen, complete with handy cup holders. The action epic "2012" was playing on a big-screen TV.

He left his job as Doña Ana County undersheriff in December and is, for the first time since he was a kid, without a job. But don't let the downtime fool you, Franco says.

Susana Martinez, his wife of 20 years (second marriage for both), has a new job, and the two have a new home in a new city. "It's been different, a lot different," Franco told me. "You go from 200 miles an hour down to a lot less. But at the same time, this is no walk in the park either. You're busy."

Franco is busy being a supportive spouse to a busy wife and a househusband – to two homes. He helped furnish the expansive private quarters at the Governor's Mansion (100 percent from the Ashley Furniture store in Las Cruces) and takes care of the two private yards, while mansion staffers tend to the public gardens.

Franco also maintains the couple's house in Las Cruces, where the governor's adult sister lives with a full-time caregiver.

"That's a lot of work, keeping up two houses," Franco said. "When I do go to Cruces, there's usually a whole list of things that need to be fixed or need to be mowed or need to be cleaned. It's no rest and relaxation when I go."

This month, he's dealt with replacing a washer and dryer and scheduled some plumbing fixes in Las Cruces, while dealing with more serious issues with the first dogs in Santa Fe.

Martinez and Franco had been nursing their Alaskan malamute Riggs, a Colorado rescue dog, back from major knee surgery when they discovered that their twin Weimaraners both have cancer.

Silver has breast cancer, and Sterling has lymphoma and cancer in her lung and spleen. The dogs are 11, and



Leslie Linthicum

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Martinez and Franco were told they might not survive surgery, so they will be kept comfortable while their cancer advances.

"We got them as little tiny pups, and they're very precious to us," Franco said. So precious that each girl has her own lounge chair in the master bedroom so they can keep the governor company in the evening.

A new evening routine was also in the cards for the governor's husband, who learned the hard way that it's best not to ask a tired chief executive, "How did your day go?"

"That's not the question to ask. It took me a while to understand that," Franco says diplomatically. "But I thought about it, and it's like, oh, my God. You deal with so many people, so many issues, so many divisions, so many departments – why would you want to rehash that when you get home? So I learned to just zip it up and let her do her thing."

After dinner, the governor climbs into bed and surrounds herself with stacks of homework and her cellphone, and Franco retires to a room off the master bedroom to pursue a passion he hasn't had time for in decades: art.

Franco, a stocky hunter and fisherman who works out with weights and a punching bag and loves to be on horseback, also loves to draw and paint. He has set up a studio and has completed a number of acrylic-on-canvas landscapes, including a sunrise view of the Sangre de Cristos that he spotted from the master bedroom.

"One morning, it was just pink as could be behind them, and I said, 'Susana, that is going to be one of my paintings,' " Franco said.

Franco has found that art, which he pursued in high school and college and then dropped when he got busy with family and career, is a perfect way for him to relax and stay close to his wife while she gets her work done.

"It keeps us close without having to say much, and it feels good," Franco said.

Franco shows off his new home in the star-struck way most of us would if we woke up one morning and found ourselves living in a mansion.

He shows off former Gov. Bill Richardson's cigar room (now a guest bedroom) where former President Bill Clinton watched the Super Bowl. And the lawn where Harrison Ford and Calista Flockhart were married.

"How funny," he says, "to walk where the president walked and where Harrison Ford walked."

His walk-in closet is enormous. "I've never had this much space in my life," Franco told me. "I keep teasing (Martinez): Go ahead and get mad at me, I'll go live in my closet."

Because he's a working dude, its shelves are filled with neatly stacked T's and gimme caps, and its hangers hold pressed jeans. A small corner is devoted to suit jackets, but Franco has resisted buying a tuxedo. He rents when invitations call for black tie.

Franco even showed me the gubernatorial master bathroom, and I can tell you that Martinez and Franco are a couple of neatniks and that their shower is big enough to bathe a 130-pound Malamute in – not that I'm saying that has ever happened.

Franco said he envisions his role primarily as a supportive husband. While first ladies have had schedulers or other staff, he does not. Nor is he pursuing political agendas as some first ladies have.

But he has joined the board of the New Mexico Coalition for Literacy, a cause close to his heart from his work in Las Cruces under the federally funded Weed and Seed program to help at-risk youths. There he saw firsthand how improving reading skills helped kids succeed in school.

Franco just finished reading "Lone Survivor," the gripping account by U.S. Navy SEAL team leader Marcus Luttrell of Operation Redwing, a deadly battle against the Taliban in Afghanistan. "Awesome book," he says.

Franco also volunteers as an instructor for the Horses for Heroes program, which teaches disabled veterans horsemanship and ranching skills. He helps out on clinics and roundups.

"You don't realize how fortunate you are to have all your physical attributes until something's missing," Franco said. "To just watch some of them saddle up with their disability, it's amazing. They have learned to deal with it, and they do it perfectly and it's awesome."



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and they do it perfectly and it's awesome.

And he volunteers with New Day, a nonprofit organization that helps troubled youths and their families.

"Growing up, I was very, very blessed to have two good parents, and I was involved in Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts and baseball and everything and so were they," Franco says. "A lot of these young adults nowadays have never had that, they've never been blessed with that, and hence they have made some bad decisions and that has caused them to be where they're at. You feel for them, and you're just so glad to be a part of their lives."

Between his volunteer activities, taking care of the house in Las Cruces and traveling with the governor, Franco figures he spends about a week out of every month in Santa Fe, and he's had to get used to seeing his wife less as she travels independently as well.

"Susana is gone just as much, and hopefully we're together once in a while," Franco said. "Don't get me wrong; I try to go with her as much as I can, but there's a lot of times I just can't go. For the most part, it's OK. We don't mind. But it's hard. We had to get used to that."

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