

Las Cruces hosted the 23rd annual meeting of the New Mexico Coalition for Literacy (NMCL) June 16-17. Among the awards presented during the event was Exceptional Literacy Project, given to the ProLiteracy International Family Literacy Initiative in Crownpoint, Laguna and Zuni. Pictured are NMCL Executive Director Heather Heunermund, Jean Paquin of the Laguna Pueblo, learning consultant Elise Packard and NMCL board President Richard Cervantes. The project, "Recovering Language, Revitalizing Culture" works to keep alive the native languages of the Zuni, Laguna and Navajo people.



Las Cruces Bulletin photo by Richard Coltharp

# Las Cruces hosts literacy groups

## Advocates seek cooperation

By **Richard Coltharp**

Las Cruces Bulletin

*"Once you learn to read, you will be forever free."*  
— Frederick Douglass

If you believe the words of Frederick Douglass, then Hotel Encanto de Las Cruces was packed with liberators June 16-17.

Nearly 100 people from throughout the state attended the 23rd annual meeting of the New Mexico Coalition for Literacy (NMCL), which focuses on building literacy for adults reading below a sixth-grade level, but the gathering included literacy advocates for all ages.

"There is a diversity of literacy providers and organizations that support each other," said Heather Heunermund. "This event is all about coalition building, and connecting and coordinating literacy services statewide."

Literacy organizations have been hit hard by the economic downturn, Heunermund said. Nearly all in New Mexico that rely on state and federal monies have seen funding cut.

"We're having to work to raise more money, more public awareness," she said. "But working together, we can do it. Before, we could work in silos. We don't have that luxury anymore."

Anita Hernandez, the New Mexico State University Don and Sarrah Kidd endowed chair in literacy and an associate professor in the college of education at NMSU, was the keynote speaker for the event.

"When you ask 'What is literacy,' we have to take a comprehensive view. It's more than just words on a page," Hernandez said.

These days literacy may also include understanding of computers, and that comprehensive view means literacy assistance is needed from infancy to adulthood, Hernandez said.

With one of the highest poverty rates in the nation, New Mexico also has one of the highest percentages of adults who are functionally illiterate.

"Almost half of adult New Mexicans can't read above the sixth-grade level," Heunermund said. "And more and more students who graduate from high school can't read and write well."

NMCL recognized what it terms "most exemplary pillars," as well as the most exceptional student, from the 27 programs it supports. Recipients included: Student of the Year: Patricia Corral, Literacy Link - Leamos, Silver City; Volunteer Tutor of the Year: Gabriela Medina, Catholic Charities, Albuquerque; Board Member of the Year: Valerie Brooker, Literacy Volunteers of Santa Fe; Exceptional Literacy Program: ProLiteracy IFLI in Crownpoint, Laguna, and Zuni; Trainer of the Year: Yvonne Post Wise, Rio Rancho; President's Award: Dr. Janet Green, Director - School of Hotel, Restaurant, and Tourism Management, NMSU; Distinguished Service: Representative Rhonda King, Stanley; Partnership: Western Commerce Bank, Carlsbad and Albuquerque; and Outgoing President: Richard Cervantes, New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology, Albuquerque.

Since 1987, NMCL has provided funding, training, technical assistance, access to its special lending library and public relations to adult literacy programs throughout New Mexico. NMCL was established under the Carruthers administration by first lady Kathy Carruthers, and has remained a state initiative since its founding. Begun as an effort to gain support through the Legislature to provide modest operating expenses for community-based adult literacy programs, NMCL has grown both in stature and capacity to support these programs, all while maintaining a small and efficient staff of three.

NMCL is funded by the Department of Cultural Affairs/State Library through the New Mexico State Legislature, but also relies on fundraisers and community support. For more information about adult literacy, to schedule an interview or refer a potential student, call the NMCL's literacy hotline 800-233-7587, email info@nmcl.org, or visit www.nmcl.org.





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