

Lou Ellen Kay

Biologist, educator finds hope in younger generations

Lou Ellen Kay asked herself a question. “What can I do that might make a difference?”

The answer: “If we start a school, take these bright kids, and educated them well, maybe some of them might make a difference.”

Here is a look at Lou Ellen from two people who know her quite well.

From Mary McDonald: When my sister, Lou Ellen Kay, moved to the Mesilla Valley, she was a young scientist with a husband and very young child.

She had been doing scientific research and continued doing that and publishing research articles in well-respected scientific journals for many more years. She resumed teaching at the university level and is proud of one of the comments in a student evaluation.

“I thought botany would be boring,” the student wrote. “It’s not!”

Lou Ellen is passionate about teaching and biology, so when some of her students asked her to help them produce an Earth Day, she agreed. She then organized two more Earth Day events in 1990 and 1991 with help from the students and community. Soon after, she became one of the founding board members of the Southwest Environmental Center, where she served for several years.

Lou Ellen has always made things and started making animal-shaped furniture while in Las Cruces. It is shown, to some acclaim, in several galleries.

Now Lou Ellen is working more than full time, with no pay at the school she founded (using her inheritance from our mother, a long-time teacher), the Las Cruces Academy. She teaches science and cursive as well as running day-to-day activities, with the help of her husband

and son and a wonderful group of teachers. She is justifiably proud of how well the students are doing. The Academy recently earned status as a Confucius Classroom, based on the excellence of the Chinese teaching, with similar results learning English and Spanish.

They also have done well in math, science, social studies and music, and in being nice people.

From her husband and colleague, Vince Gutschick:

By dint of 12 years volunteering her time, an estimated 20,000 hours, Dr. Lou Ellen Kay has built, run, and taught at a remarkable school, the Las Cruces Academy. The Academy is a non-profit, private school serving students in early kindergarten through eighth grade.

Noteworthy is her vision of high academics with enveloping emotional and social support for students. She has



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AT A GLANCE

What roles do you play as a woman?

Wife, mother of one, sister of four, daughter, granddaughter, aunt, niece, cousin

What year were you first in the Mesilla Valley?

1985

What's your favorite chile dish in the Mesilla Valley?

My homemade chile cheese dish

What is your job?

Co-founder, head of Las Cruces Academy

What is your hobby?

Making things, including animal furniture and my pond

What motivates you?

I am a biologist, and the fear of climate change motivated me to start this school, and maybe some of these bright kids can someday make a difference

engaged many people who gladly helped the vision come to fruition. Volunteers helped set up the physical plant, the curriculum, the website and more. She worked tirelessly to recruit the very best teachers, giving them academic freedom to create a great curriculum that has always adhered to her vision of incorporating three languages – English, Chinese, and Spanish – high-level science (she and I are both career Ph. D. scientists eager to share our passion for science), and a full set of courses from early childhood learning through social studies, art, music, physical education, computer programming and even cursive writing.

Our students thrive, with measured

progress of an average ranking in the top 1 percent nationally with the Iowa Assessments. They love to come to school early and stay late. Two other teachers and I volunteer our time with pleasure. Our son, David, has worked tirelessly to make a content-rich, secure website, lascrucesacademy.org.

Lou Ellen leaves our home at 6:30 a.m. each day and comes back at 6:30 p.m., also working weekends on the weekly newsletter and more. Lou Ellen, and all of us, are ever vigilant of student progress and problems that we rectify. We do outreach to the community with student performances and my weekly radio spots on KRWG-FM.