

SMALL WONDERS

# The New Mexican Umbrella

*Thanks to a Penurious Lady and a Conservative Gentleman Late of the IRS, a Feisty Little Foundation Is Nurturing Some Worthy Sun Belt Activists*

By Richard J. Margolis

**T**he past being what it is to most residents of Albuquerque—namely, a lot less interesting than the future—no one need be surprised that the etymology of New Mexico “REEF,” the name of a group formed only six years ago, is already “lost in the mists of history.”

That, at any rate, is the report from An Painter, REEF’s unmisty secretary-treasurer and volunteer administrator, who came aboard in 1982. She seems to recall hearing that “the word meant something significant to the founders, but now it’s just a convenient shorthand.”

For the record, the organization’s full name is the New Mexico Research Education Enrichment Foundation. Although the acronym suggests hidden hazards and sudden foundering, REEF’s actual function is to provide a safe, tax-deductible harbor for some of the region’s smallest and tippiest non-profit programs.

Unlike many other “pass-through” foundations, which act solely as dollar conduits, REEF has staked out an energetic role in its members’ activities. In the media, REEF is often their main cheerleader; with foundations and government agencies, REEF is sometimes their chief fundraiser. “We believe in what our groups are doing,”



*REEF, says An Painter, volunteer administrator, “is an opposition government bringing benefits the ‘real’ government fails to provide.”*

Painter says. “We do everything we can to help.”

Although that help does not include making the initial fundraising approaches, REEF does aid its members once they have initiated a contact. Serving sometimes as a “partner,” sometimes as a sort of character reference, REEF assists in the acquisition of income from private donors,

churches, state agencies and, to a lesser extent, foundations.

“We support a lot of projects that otherwise wouldn’t find a home,” says Painter. “They simply couldn’t exist. The people involved are aging activists from the Sixties. They’re strong on ideals, but they may be a bit weak on bookkeeping.”

Most of the 10 affiliates that have

taken shelter beneath REEF's benevolent umbrella live up to their activist press notices. (See box: "REEF's Roster.") If their leaders are wiser now—having survived the narcissistic Seventies—they seem only slightly older. Ever hopeful of progress, they have invented programs that champion issues and people frequently overlooked in the euphoria of Sun Belt life.

### Ten for the Money

Three of the groups concentrate on disarmament and attendant nuclear dilemmas; three more focus on the problems of Hispanics, both in New Mexico and south of the border; and two others dispense drug and alcohol therapy to addicts. Women's rights and rural education round out REEF's diverse decagon.

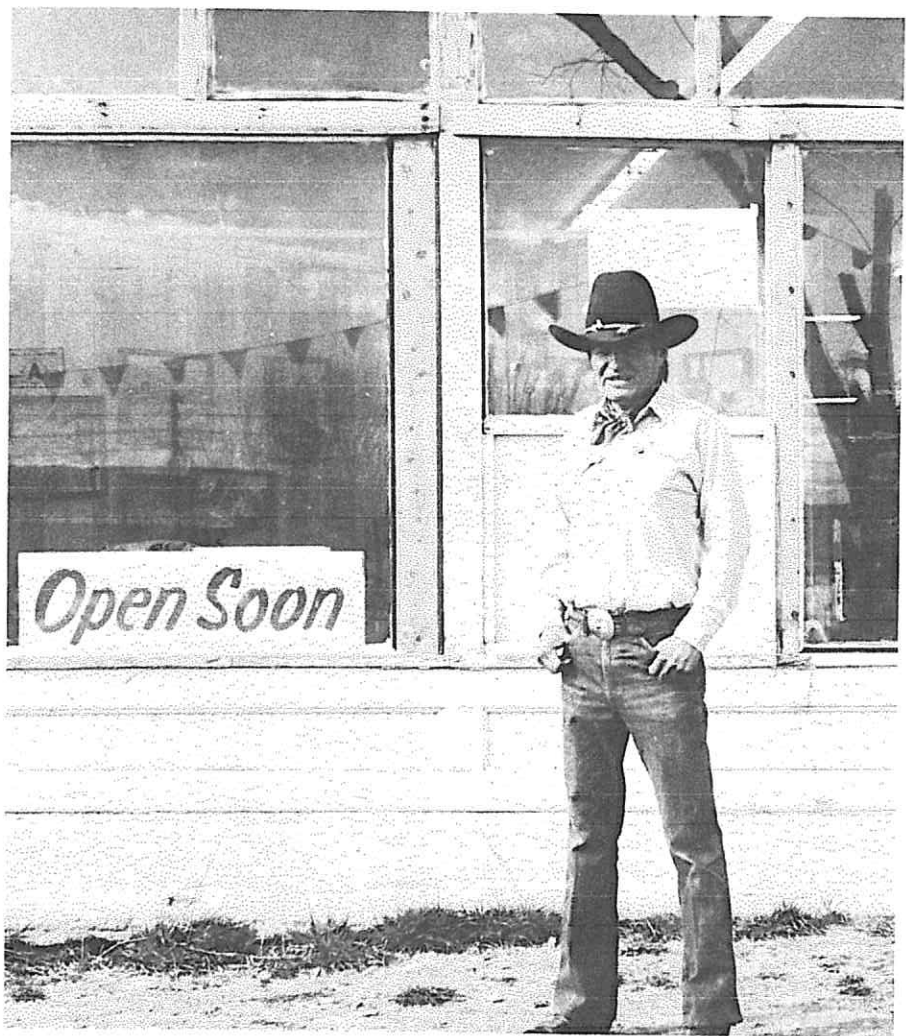
Painter likes to think of her affiliates as "an opposition government" that brings benefits "which the *real* government should be offering but is not."

The Services to Offenders Program (STOP), for instance, attempts in some measure to compensate for New Mexico's failure to have installed even one drug detoxification facility in the state. STOP has been given \$91,000 by the state's Correction's Department, channeled through REEF, to help ex-convicts exorcise their addictions.

Similarly, the Science Education Division has been busy bringing Atari computers to rural schools starved for public funds.

The fragility of such efforts may be guessed from a tendency among REEF's members to change their names almost as casually as they change their socks. The Science Education Division will soon become Information Space, a nod to its computer milieu. The Women's Educational Division seems now to prefer going by the name of its newsletter, "Sister Lode." And Citizens Against Nuclear Threats, or CANT, recently changed its name to—what? Painter can't recall.

"It's not just the marginality of the



*NEW HOME for the Thoreau Historic Center for the Arts, when finished, will employ rehabilitated alcoholics, says director Bronco Martinez.*

Left," she says. "The name game often reflects a need for a new image—and a new effort to get funding from foundations."

### Foundations and Trends

It cannot be said that foundations are battering down REEF's door, though it is true that some groups have been luckier than others. The Resource Center, before switching its focus from energy to problems in Central America and the Caribbean, was a case in point.

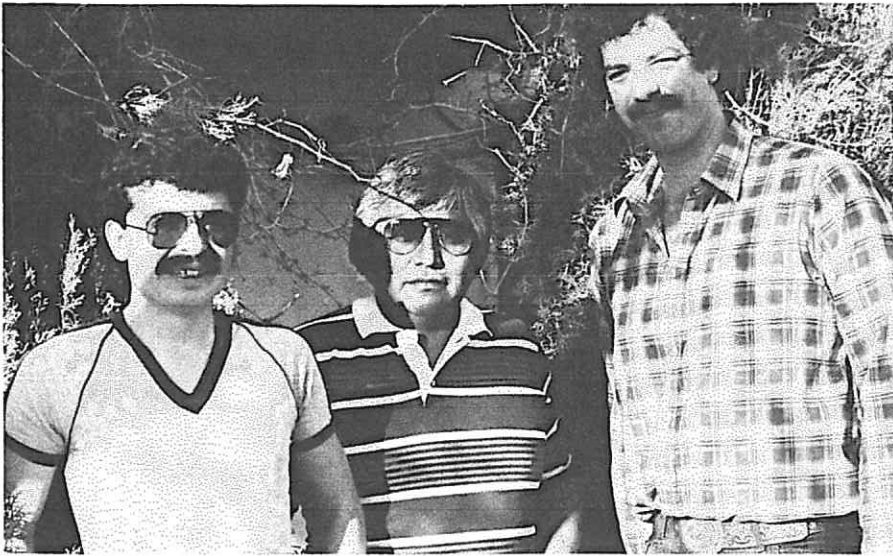
"A few years ago energy was very trendy," says Tom Barry, one of the project's founders. "We were getting small grants from foundations on both coasts"—including Shalan and Abelard in California, Kendall in Massachusetts and Arca in Washington, D.C. The organization also received money from the Fund for Investigative Jour-

nalism to conduct a study on the health of Navajos working in uranium mines.

Barry and his two partners-in-reform, Debbie Preusch and Beth Wood, used some of the foundation money to generate a remarkable series of books, broadsides and visual presentations, the most successful of which was a 1979 slide show called "People and Energy in the Southwest."

"It's been translated into 12 languages," Barry says, "including Navajo and Japanese." They also produced a book for Indian children about energy development. Titled *Red Ribbons for Emma*, it won the first annual Award for Excellence given by *Akwesasne Notes*, a national American Indian journal.

Sales from these and other Resource Center creations now account for 40 percent of the organization's revenues. (Its total budget last year was \$80,000).



**SCIENCE EDUCATION** specialists, Juan Abeyta, Victor Pedro and Jeffrey Nathanson founded Information Space to assist "Techno-peasants."

"Lately we've struck out with the foundations," Barry says. "We keep going on unemployment and off again, but we're still producing." *Dollars and Dictators*, a book on U.S. corporate policy in Central America, has already sold 5,000 copies. A parallel work on the Caribbean, *The Other Side of Paradise*, has just been bought out by Grove Press.

### Pragmatic Mother Hen

The tax-deductible dollars that The Resource Center and its partner organizations manage to attract usually flow through REEF and the meticulous hands of An Painter. Painter's attitude toward her groups is that of a strict but loving mother hen whose brood appears in constant danger of falling off a cliff. She is forever cajoling and nagging, urging her covey of idealists to pay some attention to practical matters, like cash flow and accounting.

In exchange for these services, which might be considered a form of "ledgerdemain," the member organizations pay REEF two percent of their gross. Painter has been squirreling away the payments. "We're very tight with our money," she says.

As a result, REEF now has about \$3,000 in the bank, which is more than 10 times the sum it possessed when Painter arrived two years ago. One sign of the new affluence surfaced one recent April morning when Painter and a reporter breakfasted at a local restau-

rant. For the first time in history, Painter let REEF pick up the check—\$7.64, tip included.

### Conservative Bonus

Painter gets a lot of help in her quest for fiscal order from REEF's Certified Public Accountant, John M. House, a retired gentleman who worked 21 years in the frauds division of the U.S. Internal Revenue Service.

"He's a wonderful man," says Painter. "Very precise and *very* traditional. When he comes to make an audit, our hippy-dippy members must be middle-class for one day." On the whole, the members treat House like bad-tasting medicine: they know he is good for them.

House harbors a few misgivings of his own regarding the groups he audits. A lifetime conservative, he says he "got involved with these folks because a client of mine was impressed with STOP. He pulled me in to help get the team financially organized, and after that I sort of gravitated toward the parent organization."

House says STOP is still his favorite of the 10, closely followed by "the computer fellows"—the Science Education Division (SED, for short, but pronounced "seed").

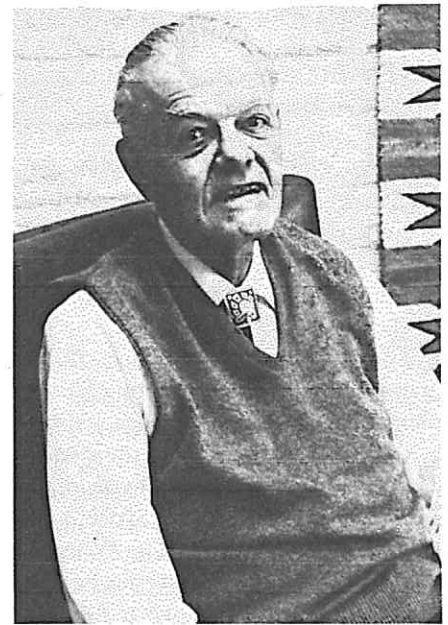
As for the rest, "I'm not strongly in favor of all that social work. I have my doubts as to what they can accomplish." But then he adds, "I do believe in their right to try."

If House is sometimes stern of speech, he is frequently soft of heart. Despite ideological differences with many REEF members, he has declined to charge them for his professional services. "I know better than anyone their financial situation," he explains.

### Rising Respectability

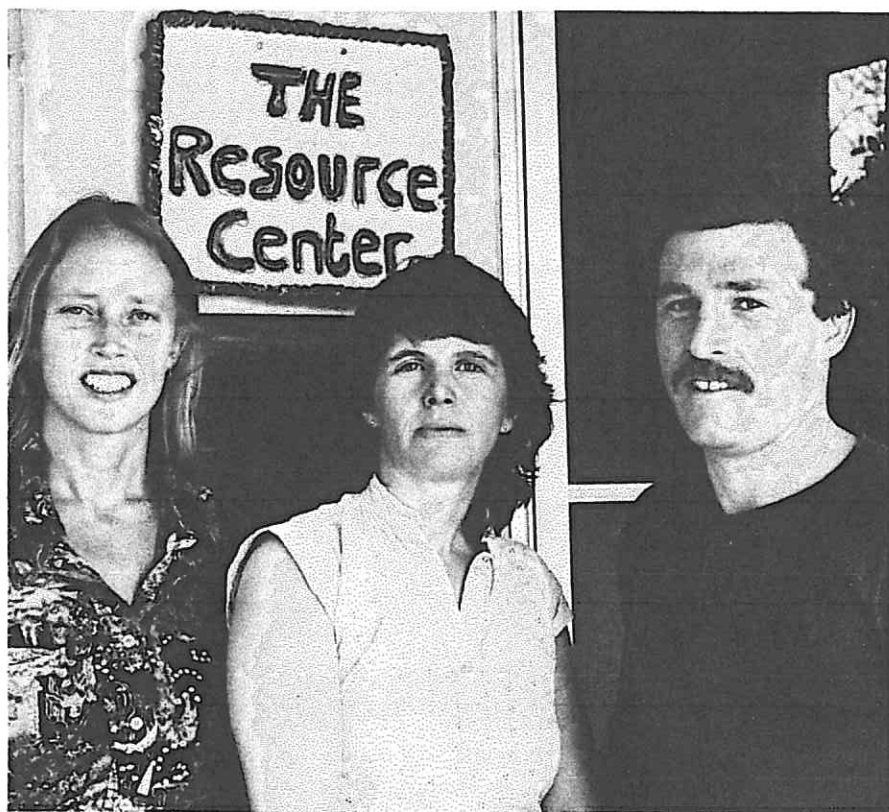
The volunteer labors of both Painter and House have brought a degree of harmony to REEF as well as a new respectability. "There are organizations asking to join," Painter says, "that a year or two ago wouldn't have given us the time of day. People trust us now. They know we're not just a whacko group."

Part of the credit goes to REEF's less controversial members; their activities have added apolitical luster to REEF's reputation. Only a New Mexican Scrooge could quarrel with SED's program, which is bringing computer enlightenment to previously benighted rural schoolchildren.



**FORMER IRS OFFICIAL** John M. House, CPA, doesn't charge for his services to REEF. "I know better than anyone their financial situation."





**PUBLISHING AND PERISHING** for short periods keeps *The Resource Center* founders Deb Preusch, Beth Wood, and Tom Barry hopping. Recently they changed the Center's focus from energy to Central American and Caribbean problems.

SED is the brainchild of three young specialists in science education—Juan Abeyta, Jeffrey Nathanson and Victor Pedro—who met while doing outreach work at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque.

"All of us were interested in equity of access to scientific and technical information," Nathanson recalls. "In today's world we seem to have two kinds of people: the technocrats and the techno-peasants. Our constituency is the techno-peasants."

Early in 1982 the trio undertook some elementary research concerning computers and schools. They found there were about 250 computers in New Mexican schools, and nearly all were located in urban areas. Not surprised, Nathanson and his colleagues dispatched a strong proposal to the Atari Institute for Educational Research.

#### Computers to the Countryside

The following fall, Atari obliged by donating 18 mobile units to SED, each with a computer, disk drive, monitor,

printer/word processor and other "peripherals." SED chose five schools for the initial experiment, all of them having high techno-peasant enrollments of Native American or Chicano children. In addition to St. Catherine's Indian School of Santa Fe, public schools in Chama, Jemez Valley, Belen and Bernalillo received computers.

The results to date have exceeded SED's rosier expectations. "Kids who were flunking," says Abeyta, "are getting better grades now. The teacher says to a student, 'If you do your work, you can get on the machine.' That's the incentive." Tardiness and truancy have sharply declined. Now, according to Pedro, "They're beating down the door to get in. They even cut other classes so they can get at the computer."

Atari and SED also began to develop an "information sharing computer network"—something like a gigantic library, says Pedro—and to set about the task of helping rural teachers become "computer literate."

"Atari has been terrific throughout,"

#### REEF's Roster

Citizens Against Nuclear Threats  
 Citizens Against Radioactive Dumping  
 Coalition for Human Rights in Latin America  
 Project Crossroads (school materials on threat of nuclear war)  
 The Resource Center (U.S. impact on Central America)  
 Science Education Division (computers for rural schools)  
 Services to Offenders Program (drug detoxification)  
 Southwest Organizing Project (Hispanic workers and voters)  
 Thoreau Historical Center for the Arts (rehabilitation of alcoholics)  
 Women's Education Division (women's rights)

Nathanson says. The company contributed equipment and expertise to the teacher training workshops, but no cash. Whereupon SED's resourceful leaders assembled a laser light show and took it on the road. In Austin and El Paso they played to large audiences, but in Albuquerque they broke all records, attracting 12,000 spectators.

The money collected has kept SED going. But—as with most REEF projects—it has been less than a princely sum, barely enough to keep body and soul together.

"We're survivors," says Pedro. "We decided we'd start by accomplishing something and worry about funding later. There's a real need out there. *Somebody* had to do it." □

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