

# Asombro Insights

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER



VOL. 35, ISSUE 2, APR. - JUNE 2026

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## CONTACT US

Asombro Institute for  
Science Education

PO Box 891  
Las Cruces, NM 88004  
(575) 524-3334

information@asombro.org  
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## Celebrating Art and A New Amphitheater at the Nature Park

On Saturday, April 11, Asombro celebrated the natural pairing of art and nature at **Art in the Park**, a family-friendly public event. Visitors strolled the trails of the Park and visited stations featuring nature journaling, stamping, clay, and watercolor, all hosted by artists from Las Cruces Arts Association, New Mexico Watercolor Society, and ArtForms Artists Association. We are especially grateful to artist Kay Gross (see page 2) for organizing the art stations.

More than 70 visitors also had the opportunity to see the permanent art installations at the Nature Park, including several murals, a tile mosaic, and a large clay sculpture.

Art in the Park featured the official opening ceremony for Asombro's new amphitheater with a beautiful mural created by local artists Zoe Spiliotis and Adrian Aguirre.

"For more than a decade, we've dreamed of an amphitheater near the main parking lot at the Park," said Asombro Executive Director, Stephanie Bestelmeyer. "Now the dream is a reality, and we are delighted to provide a beautiful gathering place for people to come learn about and enjoy the wonder of the Chihuahuan Desert."

The amphitheater was made possible, in part, by a competitive grant to Asombro from the New Mexico Department of Outdoor Recreation's Trails+ program. Design plans were created and donated by long-time Asombro supporter James Vorenberg. L & J Construction from Anthony, New Mexico helped secure the permit and build the amphitheater over several exceptionally hot weeks. The handrail was constructed and installed by MPF, Inc. from Mesilla Park.

The amphitheater will be used by K-12 students Asombro hosts on field trips, by participants in future Asombro public events, and by visitors who come to learn, explore, and enjoy the Chihuahuan Desert Nature Park on their own.



Above: Visitors paint with volunteers from the New Mexico Watercolor Society.

Below: Board President Justin Van Zee welcomes visitors to the new amphitheater at the Nature Park.



More great news came this month, when Asombro secured two additional grants to add a large shade covering over the amphitheater, making the space usable throughout the year. We hope to have the shade installed by this fall.



## FOURTEEN YEARS OF JAMMING WITH DATA

“I wonder if students can interpret real data collected in our area and come up with creative ways to communicate trends in the data to nonscientists.”

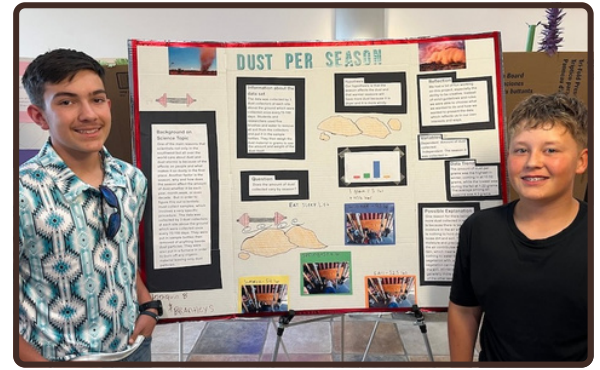
Little did we know that this simple idea and the discussion that followed between Executive Director Stephanie Bestelmeyer and Dr. Kris Havstad from the USDA-ARS Jornada Experimental Range would turn into the **DESERT DATA JAM**, a competition Asombro has hosted annually for 14 years.

The 2025/2026 Desert Data Jam took place on April 22 and 23, although the 336 participating 7<sup>th</sup> graders started working with Asombro staff on their projects back in January.

The top 41 projects made it to the final competition, and each project was judged five times by 42 volunteer judges (both scientists and non-scientists). Top prizes were awarded to:

- 1st place - Selva Balali and Evelyn Aguirre from J. Paul Taylor Academy for their project **“Holy Cow! The Heat is Rising”** with an appealing physical model showing cow body temperatures.
- 2nd place - Ian McCloskey from White Sands Middle School for **“Adapt to Change”** with a model showing coyotes and jackrabbits made of pipecleaners in grasslands and shrublands.
- 3rd place (tie) to Mya Chavez, Elisa Bai, and Izcallie Zarate-Castro from Sierra Middle School for **“A Slice of the Wild”** with a pizza containing different toppings to represent various mammal detections in two desert habitats.
- 3rd place (tie) to Trinity Martinez and Noemi Robinson from Sierra Middle School for **“Coyote Catastrophe”** with an original horror story and illustrations explaining that there are more coyotes in shrublands.

Honorable mentions were given to nine additional projects with diverse creative projects including stop-motion animation, a Dungeons and



Dragons-themed board about dust emissions, and a musical composition to represent decomposition rates.

So yes, students can absolutely represent data in creative ways, and we look forward to what they create next year, in the 15<sup>th</sup> Data Jam!

## Wonder Award for Volunteer Service

### Kay Gross

Our Wonder Award this quarter goes to the talented artist and volunteer extraordinaire Kay Gross. Kay began volunteering with Asombro in 2024 when she assisted with our Wildlife Wonders public events. She also routinely donates her beautiful nature-themed art as a fundraiser.

Kay is a natural teacher. She has hosted two sold-out watercolor classes with all the proceeds benefiting Asombro. Most recently, Kay organized our Art in the Park event on April 11, recruiting all of the artists who ran hands-on activities for

visitors of all ages. To top it all off, Kay also serves on Asombro’s Marketing Working Group, helping spread the word about Asombro throughout the community.

Kay is a WONDER-ful asset to our organization. Thank you, Kay, for your dedication to Asombro and the generous donation of your time and talents!



## Teaching the Teachers

We love teaching teachers! On March 21, we hosted a workshop in Albuquerque for 3rd-5th grade teachers from across the state. Teachers learned the four lessons Asombro developed for our Wildlife Conservation: Engineering Design in Action project. They each left with a kit of materials to teach the lessons to their students.

On post-workshop evaluations, all 18 teachers said they were going to use one or more of the activities they learned with their students and said they would like to participate in future Asombro programs. Many thanks to the NM Department of Wildlife for a grant that helped support this project.



*Hands down the BEST workshop I've been to in a long time. No notes! Perfection.*



# MARK MESCH

The Asombro Board of Directors was delighted to welcome their newest member, Mark Mesch, in February.

Mark fell in love with the Chihuahuan Desert in 1985 while on a field trip to Big Bend National Park. His then dream, of a life in the desert, was realized in 2017 when he retired to Las Cruces.

Mark's encounter with the Asombro Institute also started with a field trip, this time to its Chihuahuan Desert Nature Park. He found the Nature Park's "field" setting as the perfect laboratory complement to Asombro's science literacy mission. Paired together, these features aligned with Mark's past vocations and life values, and piqued his interest to join our Board and offer his service and support.

Mark has B.S. degrees in Psychology and Wildlife Sciences, and he worked in the natural resources field his entire career, implementing



large ecological studies, reclaiming abandoned mined lands, providing science education to Homeschoolers, and as adjunct instructor for the University of Utah.

We're so grateful that Mark is dedicating his time, energy, and considerable knowledge to Asombro. Welcome, Mark!

# ELLIE MOUCHET

Meet Ellie Mouchet, Asombro's undergraduate intern for the Spring '26 semester. After earning her initial bachelor's degree from the University of New Mexico in Creative Writing, Ellie is returning to school for a second degree in Conservation Ecology at New Mexico State University.

Growing up catching bugs, snakes, and lizards with her brothers in Santa Fe, Ellie has always had a deep love for the natural world and the diverse ecology of New Mexico. Ellie has also always loved teaching. So, in addition to Disneyland entertainment and orchestral performance, Ellie has also worked as a children's theater instructor, private instrumental and voice teacher, preschool music teacher, and regional director for a rock music outreach program for teens.

Out of a desire to be closer to family and the ever-increasing pull to pursue her childhood dream of working with wildlife, Ellie decided to return to New Mexico and go back to school. Since then, she has worked as a summer camp educator, and she currently works part-time as the living collections intern at the Las Cruces Museum of Nature and Science.

Ellie was excited to become an Asombro intern, especially when she learned about the Desert Data Jam, which gave her the opportunity to combine her creativity, scientific knowledge, and love for desert ecology.

In her work with Asombro and her future career, Ellie hopes to act as a bridge between wildlife and the public through education so that the wild spaces we love can be preserved and protected long into the future.



## THANK YOU! We are grateful to our generous donors from January - mid April 2026

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## Meet "Caliche Carlos"

The next time you visit Asombro's Chihuahuan Desert Nature Park, keep an eye out for "Caliche Carlos," the rock snake creation near the Desert Discovery Trail trailhead. Bring a painted rock to contribute to our newest mascot at the Park!

**YES!** I want to support the  
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**Asombro Institute for Science Education**  
P.O. Box 891, Las Cruces, NM 88004