

# 'I'm proud of what we did'

## Nonprofits help bring farming to Ojo Encino, Counselor and Torreon

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OJO ENCINO, N.M. — Underneath the thunderstorm, Rose Yazzie uncovered the canopy of her hoop house to allow her lush garden of lettuce, spinach, peppers, cucumbers and kale to drink Mother Earth's raindrops.

The 73-year-old is a swift mover. She had no issue bending over to harvest some of her crops that she offered to Rose and Betty Keetso, who drove the 10 or so miles from Ojo Encino Chapter last Saturday to view what locals call the "Rose Garden."

"This is the first time being introduced to this," Rose Keetso said about Yazzie's garden of green vegetables. "You only see this at Wal-Mart."

Yazzie waters her garden from a local watering hole called Yellow Rock Point Pond almost on a daily basis. She drives down to the pond, siphons the water into two tanks and then dips her sprinkler water pot into the tanks to begin feeding her plants.

"It makes me feel good," Yazzie said of being a farmer, while taking charge of her diet. "I'd like to do more."

Asked if she enjoys planting through the traditional methods of dry farming, where she has rows of blue and yellow corn, or drip-irrigation farming techniques, which requires the



Rose Yazzie, right, pulls and gathers some of her crops to offer to Rose and Betty Keetso on Saturday. (Times photo — Ravonelle Yazzie)

use of a solar hoop house, she says, "I like both."

She jokingly adds that when she works on her garden she brings sandwich bags and ranch salad dressing to digest a quick snack — like how pestering rabbits like to nibble on her lush crops.

Yazzie is one of six local farmers that are helping meet the demands of this remote community for fresh produce. Last Saturday, during the official launch of a mobile farmer's market for the communities of Ojo Encino, Counselor, and Torreon, N.M., Yazzie also sold some of her produce to locals.

The supplies Yazzie gets to maintain her field come from nonprofits Hasbídito, the Rio Puerco



A farmer's market customer eyes fresh produce at the official launch of a mobile farmer's market for the communities of Ojo Encino, Counselor, and Torreon, N.M. last Saturday. (Times photo — Ravonelle Yazzie)

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Alliance and the Quivira Coalition – all of which have directly assisted this far eastern chapter over the last 10 years.

Louphina Smith, a sales associate for the mobile farmer's market, said the market generated about \$30 in sales from residents.

Bunches of chard, kale, bok choy, Chinese lettuce – all grown by local farmers – went for \$1, while salad mixes, lettuce and spinach were sold for \$2 per bag.

In theory, the mobile farmer's market is an effort to supplement the diets of residents from the tri-chapter communities because of the high prevalence of Type II diabetes, according to Watson Castillo, program coordinator for Hasbídito, one of the supporting nonprofits.

"We've been talking about food issues the last five years," Castillo said. "Bringing back farming would be economic development."

The mobile farmer's market is also a way for locals to save a 30-minute commute to Cuba, N.M., or in most cases to Farmington or Albuquerque – both cities are approximately 100 miles away.

"In a week, we'll be going out," added Smith, who played a pivotal role in gathering data for the "Tri-Chapter Food and Energy Economic Survey Results."

The survey and the idea of a mobile farmer's market comes from the community itself, but it is largely supported and funded by the three nonprofits.

The Community Food Program of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Institute of Food and Agriculture funded the food surveys, while the energy survey was funded by a grant from Honor The Earth.

Barbara Johnson, executive director for the Rio Puerco Alliance, said being the grant funder is mostly about supporting the needs of the community.

She added that the food and energy surveys were developed to compile household-level economic data to help with future economic and community planning.

"We're using that information as a basis to start the market we have," Johnson said.

According to survey results, locals here eat potatoes, oranges, apples, lettuce and corn at higher



Local members of Ojo Encino planted watermelon, potatoes, and cucumbers in a raised bed on Saturday. (Times photo – Ravonelle Yazzie)

consumption rate than onions, carrots, tomatoes, squash and pears, for instance. And if any of these fresh fruits and vegetables were made available in their chapter, a vast majority of them – about 85 percent – responded they would consider buying these fresh foods.

When asked if they usually plant a garden or field, about one-third of households here reported planting a garden or field, with the top vegetables being squash and corn.

According to the findings of the food survey, the tri-chapter area is estimated to spend about \$4 million per year on food or about \$373 per household per month. There are 281 houses in Counselor, 187 in Ojo Encino and 433 in the Torreon area, according to the 2010 census.

"There's a great interest out there," said Craig Conley, a board member of the Rio Puerco Alliance. The forestry professor at New

Mexico Highlands University added that from his interactions with the communities he's learned how they're beginning to like eating green salads.

At the celebration launch of the mobile farmer's market, farmer Cora Yazzie-Lopez shared a fresh salad mix she made from her garden, which included romaine lettuce, spinach, broccoli, carrots, radish, chard and kale.

"I'm proud of what we did," Lopez said, adding that over the three-year period she's learned different farming techniques from the nonprofits, like planting in raised beds and learning about soil erosion.

"It shows that we really improved," Lopez said, referring to her salad that served as a healthy side dish and fed the 50 community members that celebrated the beginning of their fruitful livelihood.

# Food / Squash, corn most

# commonly grown

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Community members gathered in Ojo Encino for the official launch of a mobile's farmers market where they learned how to sift dirt and mulch, a material spread around or over a plant to enrich or insulate the soil, on Saturday. (Times photo - Ravonelle Yazzie)



Local farmer Saraphina Smith of Counselor, N.M. sells her and other locals farmers' vegetables to local community members in Ojo Encino on Saturday. (Times photo - Ravonelle Yazzie)