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By any name, looking out for New Mexico's kids

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Changing a brand name is a leap into the great unknown — and when it doesn't work, a flying leap into an endless abyss.

Katherine Freeman wasn't worried.

Well, check that. She was a little worried.

But in the end, it's the product that carries the day. So, in December, when the United Way of Santa Fe County changed its name to Growing Up New Mexico (there's more on the business card, but let's stick with this for now), Freeman figured people who cared about kids and early education would continue to support the organization because it was the mission, not the words, that tugged at people's hearts and donors' wallets.

"Actually, it was quite easy and quite satisfactory to most of our donors," says Freeman, the organization's longtime executive director and one of the key drivers of the early ed movement in this state. "... We changed our mission probably 16 years ago, focused solely on early childhood education and care. So, by now, when we changed our name, most of our donors, if not all of our

donors, were donating because of their concern and passion about early childhood.

“So, it was a really very easy conversion actually with our donors, just because the name Growing Up New Mexico seemed more compatible, and clearly articulated our position more than being a part of United Way Worldwide,” she adds. “It was a really, really positive, positive response from donors and we haven’t lost any.”

It’s going to be an interesting year for early education in New Mexico, with momentum building for a draw from the Land Grant Permanent Fund and the state and nation beginning the corner turn on COVID-19. As it applies to Santa Fe, Growing Up New Mexico’s brand change — something that had been in the offing for years, Freeman says — could be another jumping off point.

But first comes the process of getting through the pandemic. And for the Growing Up New Mexico organization, plus just about every other early childhood/family support outfit in the state, it’s been a tough process. It may be years before we truly know how difficult the crisis has been on families, particularly working families.

For Growing Up New Mexico, which serviced more than 100 3- and 4-year-olds at the Early Childhood Learning Center at Kaune, COVID-19 forced an enrollment reduction of 40 percent, based on health concerns. And like just about everyone else in America who had a building and clients to serve, it created a need to rethink just about everything it did, from spacing and health protocols to virus testing and cleaning.

You think the public schools are walking on eggshells when they contemplate putting kids and teachers into a building? Try opening the doors to kids, babies, who are 3 and 4.

“We were very fortunate,” Freeman says. “That building at Kaune is so big, and half of it wasn’t being used. So, we’re able to do that — maintain very small ... eight, we have eight kids in the classroom, with two teachers. We did that. The staff is tested every two weeks; there’s still drop-off outside for parents; everybody wears masks all the time; we have an extreme cleaning going on every day. Nobody can come into the building, except the kids who are going to school. ...”

Freeman went on for another couple sentences, but you get the idea. Safety first.

It’s been a difficult time. And it won’t be getting easier anytime soon.

But then, in New Mexico and with early childhood education, it's never been simple. Emotionally, cognitively, the concept connects with a lot of people. But the details and the money and, mostly, the patience it takes to see a long-term investment pay off have always hindered its momentum, at least in the Legislature.

But for people like Freeman who were in on the ground floor, the patience is beginning to pay off. Abetted now by a Cabinet-level agency (the Early Childhood Education and Care Department), plus a general agreement that New Mexico must do something radical to rise from No. 49 in key metrics involving kids, there are the kernels of hope. It's complex, but doable.

Just not easy. Even after COVID-19 has dissipated, it will not be easy. Kaune will again be full someday, but there are many, many Kaunes still to build around New Mexico.

"The growth part, that's still a little bit away," Freeman says cautiously.

Growing Up New Mexico? The name might say more than Freeman ever imagined.

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