The Colorado Health Foundation™



Recognizing What I Don’t Know

The community of Alamosa, located in Colorado’s San Luis Valley, is a special place. The Rio Grande snakes its way through the county of 16,000 residents, enriching the fertile soil that grows the cottonwood trees which give the area its Spanish name. Beyond its foliage, the city continues to reflect its Spanish heritage today. Nearly half of all Alamosans identify as Hispanic or Latino, with many able to trace their families’ roots living in the valley back several generations.

The spirit of Alamosa is epitomized by the strong family values and hard work ethic of those who live in the region. In the face of a local opioid crisis and difficult economic conditions, Alamosans express pride in where they come from and see a brighter future ahead for themselves and their children.

I have been coming to Alamosa regularly since joining the Colorado Health Foundation as a program officer back in 2017. This community is one of several across the state where the Foundation is engaging more deeply over a longer period of time. We believe that by working locally, we can better support efforts to strengthen community health. Communities already have the knowledge and ability to solve their own challenges. We see our role in this work as one of connecting people, organizations and resources to improve quality of life and address barriers to health equity.

Over time, I’ve come to look at Alamosa as my second home, and I feel a strong sense of belonging as I cross the county line and roll across the Rio Grande. As a city girl who grew up in Denver, it has been a privilege getting to know the people of this rural community and the wider San Luis Valley. And although I’ve learned so much over the last year and a half, I recognize there’s still a lot that I don’t know.

Coming Together in Community

At some level, I see my efforts of engaging with Alamosans on behalf of the Foundation as part of a large exercise in hands-on community building. We're all coming together and feeling each other out. We're asking each other these questions: What does the Foundation want to accomplish here? What do community members expect from us? What projects and collaborations are already happening that can be leveraged and supported?

I see our collective goal as this – to improve health and opportunity for all who call Alamosa 'home,' no matter their age, educational level, economic status or race. And I feel strongly that being able to generate a mutual sense of trust and understanding is key to our eventual success in this endeavor.

Trust within a community is about a shared sense of purpose that is created through building and fostering relationships that are real. It's about breaking down walls, being vulnerable with each other and admitting what we don't know. It's an essential part of what guides us as program officers and how we try to show up in our work.

Although I'm optimistic about the potential we have to build this shared trust in Alamosa, I can understand the initial hesitation – and perhaps skepticism – that I'd sometimes encounter in people on my early trips there. "Why is she here? What are her intentions? Why does the Colorado Health Foundation want to meet with me, and what in the world do they mean when they talk about 'health equity' anyway?" Those are all fair and relatable questions.

Earning Trust as a Foundation

As passionate as I am about increasing opportunities for all Coloradans to live their healthiest lives, I realize true change, especially at the local level, takes time, humility and compromise. And – perhaps most importantly – a belief in one another. Some Alamosans have justifiably been disappointed in the past by well-intentioned efforts to make changes and "fix" things in their community. Promises at times have been broken; exciting initiatives have fizzled out. The financial resources, time and support initially offered always end up leaving, while those who live in Alamosa remain.

At the Foundation, we hope to learn from both the experiences of others and the mistakes we've made in the past. I know that the confidence and trust of people and organizations across the San Luis Valley in the Foundation is a privilege to be earned and nothing short of that.

I also understand that a large part of building that trust is through how I, Monique Johnson, show up every time I'm in Alamosa. It requires me to hold myself accountable by consistently asking these questions. Am I listening enough? Am I responsive enough? Do I have empathy for other points of view, even though I have strong convictions in the Foundation's mission, values and cornerstones? Do I look for ways to add value and share resources beyond just our grant funding?

The community of Alamosa is on a journey together, and its ability to create greater opportunities for health and equity for all lies in strong cross-community relationships and a lot of hard work. One meeting, one phone call, one interaction at a time. This hard work is already happening all around me. My job is to support these local efforts the best I can while acknowledging that, as an outsider, I need to first and foremost be a listener and a learner.

Trusting Our Neighbors

It happens in every sector. Silos spring up. Power dynamics stay entrenched. We keep to our bubbles and prefer the comfort of having our ideas validated rather

than challenged. It’s a tendency driven by human nature, and we at the Foundation are guilty of it at times as well.

It can be a natural urge to self-segregate, but we have an opportunity to break the cycle through intentionality, and even a bit of forced discomfort and uncertainty mixed in.

As I collaborate further with community members and organizations in Alamosa, my approach to engagement is to focus on bringing together a diverse representation of Alamosans to tackle the pressing issues related to health and well-being we uncover.

Community leaders are working through how to partner more effectively around shared challenges. Does the health care clinic regularly talk to the neighborhood food bank in this community? If not, then let’s get them both together in a room. Are the individuals most impacted by socio-economic barriers to good health listened to, or are they often voiceless? The latter? Ok, give them this microphone and throw open the window so their voices can be heard.

Yes, disagreements arise, and there are growing pains as a part of these conversations. Change is never smooth, and it’s often not pretty. We’re all just trying to figure it out. All we know is that we’re talking with each other. And that’s a good thing. If we’re talking, that means we’re communicating; and if we’re communicating, then we’re on our way to figuring things out.

We Are All in the Health Business

I was in Alamosa a while back at a leadership development workshop organized by the Foundation in partnership with the Center for Creative Leadership. The workshop included over two dozen attendees from a broad cross-section of the community. They included community members who work in hospitals, clinics, nonprofits and in affordable housing, as well as local representatives from the

business community and government.

One of the participants, a woman named Cristalray, is a local business owner. She approached me during a break during that first workshop to chat. In the morning ice breaker, she had been unsure of how to introduce herself to the group. Other members talked about being a nonprofit CEO or on staff at the community health clinic.

“I’m feeling a bit out of place here, Monique,” I recall her saying. “I’m not part of the health field, so what do I have to offer in this work?”

It’s a tough question, but my answer was simple. “A whole lot,” I said.

We are often quick to identify ourselves primarily with our job title and forget that we all have the capacity to be leaders on these issues if given a chance. No matter where we work or live, we can all commit to being a voice that champions economic empowerment, fair access to housing, racial equity, increased access to behavioral health resources, etc.

It’s not easy, not for you and not for me. Still, I applaud anyone who joins hands with others well-versed in this work to take the first steps on this journey. And I’m proud to say that since that initial workshop, Cristalray has emerged as a strong leader in our cohort. She now often speaks enthusiastically about how her business and personal interests align with the group’s efforts to address the various community health challenges we’ve identified.

In many ways, my own work in Alamosa is just getting started. I highlighted the importance of trust throughout these reflections, and I realize that trust is a process. Strong relationships are not built overnight. We still have a ways to go. And I also know there’s more I need to learn before I truly can say I understand where this community has been, where it currently is and where it wants to be.

In the meantime – as always – I'm looking forward to my next trip down south to the San Luis Valley. If you see me on the street or down along the river walk, please come over and say 'hello.' I'd value the opportunity to listen and learn from you about the Alamosa you know, and all the great things already happening to bring health in reach.

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Blog

POST DATE

May 7, 2019

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