

# High Country News

FOR PEOPLE WHO CARE ABOUT THE WEST

## Land of Disenchantment

*A native New Mexican digs for the roots of a tragic epidemic*

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**Angela Garcia** | April 3, 2006 | *From the print edition*

Each spring during Holy Week, the state highway between Santa Fe and Taos blossoms with roadside signs warning drivers to "Watch for Walkers." The walkers in question are thousands of religious pilgrims, who, following Hispanic tradition, make their way on foot to El Santuario de Chimayó, a centuries-old adobe church believed to be built on sacred earth with healing powers.

When I was a child in Albuquerque, I watched the pilgrimage on local TV. I listened in awe to exhausted pilgrims who described miraculous recoveries from illness and injury. I wanted to be a pilgrim, too, to walk and kneel with the rest of the faithful, gathering handfuls of the church's holy dirt in my hands.

My mother, however, was an ambivalent Catholic, and preferred to avoid the Easter rush. We should visit the shrine when it's quieter, she argued; it will be easier then for God to hear our prayers. Besides, our occasional trips to Chimayó were about more than just visiting El Santuario. They were about my family's own pilgrimage: the journey north itself, the wonder we felt upon leaving the city for the storied Sangre de Cristo Mountains.

I remember leisurely drives along winding country roads, the windows of our car rolled down to catch the seasonal perfumes of fresh-cut alfalfa or burning firewood. Local apples and apricots beckoned from roadside fruit stands, and we always stopped to buy piñon nuts from the old man who set up shop on the bed of his Chevy pickup truck on the outskirts of Española.

I was around 7 years old when, on one of these drives, I first announced my plans to live in a northern village one day. I suppose I fancied myself a Hispanic version of Laura Ingalls Wilder in *The Little House on the Prairie*. In the north, I could escape my

family's violence and addiction; I could find a peaceful refuge in an old adobe house, surrounded by an endless landscape where I could safely roam.

Twenty-five years later, I did move to a small northern village, but not for the reasons I'd once had. I came as a doctoral student in anthropology. The place I'd dreamed of as a refuge was experiencing an epidemic of drug addiction, and I wanted to understand it.

**Both the Chimayó of my youth** and my current home, Velarde, are located in the predominantly Hispanic Española Valley, in north-central New Mexico. They are part of a network of small, tightly knit villages radiating outward from the town of Española. Many residents trace their ancestry directly back to early Spanish settlers. They consider themselves "Spanish" (or "Hispano," or *Nortehño*) and they speak a unique Spanish dialect peppered with archaisms that date back to the original *pobladores*, or townfolk. The Native American residents of the San Juan and Santa Clara pueblos, located within the Valley, trace their lineage back even further. Newcomers from Mexico add to the mix, bringing with them a different flavor of Spanish and new businesses that cater to their growing community.

The Rio Grande snakes through the Valley on a north-south axis, lined by tall cottonwoods. On the northeastern edge lie the foothills of the Sangre de Cristos, whose peaks are snow-capped from October through June. The northwest boundary is marked by the Chama River and extends toward the village of Abiquiu, immortalized in the landscape paintings of Georgia O'Keeffe.

Generations of artists have been drawn to this landscape, painting the same chapels, the same mountains, the same dramatic, sweeping skies. It is easy to see why: The Valley is pastoral beauty incarnate, particularly when one is whizzing by in the comfort of an SUV, or perched with a camera on a scenic overlook. But beauty is never a simple thing; it can also be a distraction, obscuring the suffering that exists along the margins of what one wants, or is willing, to see.

Since the mid-1990s, the Española Valley has had the highest per capita rate of heroin addiction in the country — higher than New York, Baltimore, or Chicago — with a rate of heroin-related deaths that is over four times the national average. Between 1995 and 1998, there were 85 reported heroin-related deaths in the Valley. There were 41 deaths in 2003 alone, staggering in an area with only about 20,000 residents.

Heroin is extracted from a poppy plant native to Europe and western Asia. These days,

opium poppies are primarily grown by impoverished farmers in remote parts of the world. The heroin that comes to the Valley is largely from Mexico, whose poppy production increased dramatically after Mexico's economic crisis in the 1990s. Traffickers follow the route of the *Camino Real*, or Royal Road, established by Spanish settlers more than 400 years ago. Today that road, widened and paved, is Interstate 25. It is still celebrated as the means through which northern New Mexico's Hispano culture emerged, but ironically, it carries the drug that is killing the region's people.

No one knows for sure when heroin first came to the Española Valley. Some residents remember relatives returning from jobs in distant cities with heroin as early as the 1950s. Others recall Vietnam War veterans who came home with addictions. The drug was firmly established in the Valley by the 1980s, known by residents as the golden age of the *tecató* — heroin addict in Chicano slang. Locals say heroin users of this period had a strict code of ethics, and didn't allow their drug use to interfere with family or community responsibilities. If it did, problems were quietly handled at home.

Things began to change, however, in the early 1990s. "Before, everything was in private," says Silviano Maestas, a 52-year-old Valley resident and recovering addict. "It was a small group of guys, not bothering anyone. *Pero* things changed, no?" Suddenly, Silviano says, heroin use was "*al aire libre*," out in the open. "People didn't care no more who saw them, or what they did to get it."

Strung-out addicts wandered the streets, often hitching rides to meet their dealers. Hypodermic needles turned up everywhere, even in the holiest places: in churchyards and cemeteries, and in the *acequias*, or irrigation ditches. The emergency room at the Española Hospital became a dumping ground for overdose victims — many of them abandoned by companions who feared arrest. Month by month, the death toll mounted.

**Heroin use in the Española Valley finally** hit the national news in the fall of 1999, when 150 law enforcement agents descended on the village of Chimayó and arrested 31 suspected dealers. The Raid, as it is known in the Valley, was a part of a larger interstate crackdown known as "Operation Tar Pit," named for the unusually pure strain of black tar heroin from Mexico that was causing a high number of overdoses.

Since the Raid, the media have issued an endless string of reports on the Valley's heroin problem. The national media typically dwell on the irony of drug addiction in such a beautiful place. The local media focus on the most obvious impacts of heroin addiction: the crime and death. Each week, the "Police Blotter" of Rio Arriba County's local paper

adds to the litany of heroin-related sorrows. (That is how I discovered last summer that one of my neighbors had been busted for drugs. And it's how I learned, one day last fall, that another neighbor had overdosed and died.) The constant media chorus adds to the collective sense that heroin has been here, as Hispanos say, *forever*.

These days, for the locals, heroin overdoses have become as much a part of the landscape as the juniper-dotted hills. "You get to a point where you kind of expect it," says 44-year-old recovering addict and Española resident Mary Ramírez. "Because you've already been through it — over and over." Mary knows; she used heroin for nearly 20 years. In the past five years, she has buried a husband and brother, both overdose victims. Last year, Mary's eldest daughter overdosed, but survived.

Still, visitors are surprised — and horrified — by the enormity of the problem. "How could this place be a heroin epicenter?" a colleague from back East asks me. She cannot reconcile the Valley's scenery with the dismaying reality. Journalists from around the country frequently express similar surprise — implying that heroin belongs more to urban ghettos than historic villages of cottonwoods and adobe chapels, as if poverty and addiction cannot exist in a bucolic setting. Perhaps it is precisely because this landscape has been so powerfully represented by generations of American artists — who typically render the land as scenery without people — that visitors are blind to the possibility of such a contradiction.

Whatever the reason, there has been little inquiry into why heroin has become epidemic here.

This is the question that motivates my research. Since I came to the Valley in the spring of 2004, I've asked everyone I meet why they think heroin is such a problem. I've interviewed drug counselors, health care providers, religious leaders and land activists. I've talked to over 40 heroin addicts, many of whom I met at the region's drug detoxification clinic, when I worked the graveyard shift as a detox attendant.

The nights at the clinic were long and filled with sounds — prayers and cries and the shuffle of slippered feet. These were the sounds of my childhood, too, the sounds that reverberate in my memory and in my writing, along with the question: Why?

***Why heroin? Why here?*** Ask any Hispano, addict or not, and you are bound to get an earful.

The first reason is probably the least surprising: the great disparity of wealth in northern New Mexico. The Española Valley itself has never been a wealthy area, but in recent decades tremendous amounts of money have poured into nearby towns, such as Santa Fe and Los Alamos.

Severe drug addiction in poor communities adjacent to affluent ones is a pattern that social scientists have documented worldwide. Some credit the struggle of living in severe poverty while others enjoy lives of ease. Others describe the stigma of crossing the lines between rich and poor, and the abuse that frequently accompanies this crossing.

Anthropologist Philippe Bourgois has documented this pattern of drug use in New York and San Francisco — cities where neighborhoods of extreme wealth and poverty border each other. Harmful public policy weakens local economies and the social welfare system, and leads to the vast disparities in incarceration rates among different races and ethnicities. This creates what Bourgois calls "an aura of apartheid." Even neighborhoods that were once vibrant and healthy are socially and economically marginalized; drug use becomes endemic.

Last year, the World Health Organization launched the Commission on the Social Determinants of Health. Echoing the long-held view of local activists, researchers and health providers, the commission found that living conditions — social, political and economic — play a major role in drug addiction.

"It is poverty and social inequality that kills," says Nancy Krieger, professor of public health at Harvard University. According to Krieger, inequality "deprives individuals and communities of a healthy start in life, increases their burden of disability and disease, and brings early death."

In the Española Valley, the inequality is palpable. Many locals blame the Los Alamos National Laboratories for the region's deepening chasm between rich and poor. Since the 1940s, the Labs have demanded a local "nonprofessional" work force — maintenance and security crews, for example. Today, the Labs are the largest employer of Valley residents. During rush hour, the Old Los Alamos Highway, which connects Española with the "Atomic City," is bumper-to-bumper with frustrated commuters. Meanwhile, back at home, many of the old family farms lie untended.

Los Alamos is the wealthiest county in the United States, with a median household

income of over \$93,000 and a below-poverty rate of under 3 percent. Rio Arriba County, which encompasses much of the Española Valley below, is among New Mexico's poorest counties, with a median income of \$29,000. One in five Valley residents lives below the poverty line.

There's another, less obvious factor that contributes to the spread of heroin through the community. Ironically enough, it is the profound significance of the family in Hispano culture. For generations, family members have lived and worked together. Asked where she lived, a valley resident would not offer the name of a village like Velarde or Alcalde; she would tell you, *Los Rendones*, or *Los Luceros*, neighborhoods identifiable by surname because they were composed entirely of relatives. Insular and self-sufficient, the family was the center of social and economic life; it was the conduit through which land, language and tradition were kept alive.

These ties endure in families that share heroin, passing the addiction from one generation to another. In sharp contrast to the mainstream notion of heroin addicts as urban loners, isolated from family or community, in the Española Valley, the family is often the primary domain of heroin use. It is also the primary source of support and care; most cases of heroin overdose are "handled at home" by relatives, never coming to the attention of health workers.

"Family is everything," says 28-year-old Marta Vigil, an addict who is awaiting sentencing for drug trafficking, a charge she denies. Officially, she is under house arrest, and wears an electronic monitor around her ankle. She is using her approved "therapy time" outside of home to "play hooky and have lunch like a normal person." She meets me in a fast-food restaurant in Española.

"Family is everything." I have heard this expression from heroin addicts before. Marta senses my difficulty reconciling the ideal of family togetherness with drug abuse — family members helping each other get drugs, or using drugs together. So she tells me her story.

Marta's mother was a heroin addict. She remembers terrible nights in her childhood, when her mother agonized in "*las malias*" — the sharp, shooting pains in the limbs and the profuse sweating brought on by withdrawal. She would be all upset, crying, Marta says. "You're a kid, and you're scared they're gonna die. And, basically, you'll do anything to make them feel better," she says. "Sometimes, the only thing you feel like you can do is get them high."

Marta knows what *las malias* feel like. She began using heroin with a boyfriend when she was 16. At first, her mother refused to give her drugs or use them with her. But within a year, Marta had developed a serious habit, and her mother started supplying her with drugs for the same reasons that Marta had supplied her mother with them. "*Lo que pasa es...*" Marta starts to explain, then switches to English, as if to set the record straight: "The thing is, nobody wants to see their kid in pain."

She and her mother became "running partners." Frequently, they talked of getting help, of quitting the drugs. "In a way, it was easier to be together," she says. "The drug life can be scary. When you got your mom by your side, you feel, I don't know, less afraid, less embarrassed ... I think she felt that way, too."

**Poverty and family ties play a powerful role** in this story. But there's yet another force at work here, one that becomes evident one afternoon while I'm talking to 47-year-old addict Joseph Martinez.

Joseph grew up in Hernandez, a village about five miles northwest of Española, made famous by Ansel Adams' photograph *Moonrise, Hernandez*.

I describe the image to Joseph — the brightly illuminated clouds, the glowing church and cemetery. Joseph shakes his head; he's unfamiliar with the picture. But he knows the cemetery; he tells me that several of his relatives are buried there. "I used to get high there," he says.

At first, Joseph is reluctant to talk about life "back then" — life in Hernandez. But he wants to make one thing clear to me: Drugs, he insists, did not define his life there. There were always so many other things to do: sow the fields, gather firewood, patch the adobe walls, all in addition to odd jobs in town. "When you've got a lot of land and you've got to heat a house, you're busy," he says. "But it's a good busy."

Occasionally, when Joseph talks about the past, he slips into the present tense, as if his deceased relatives are still alive, as if he still lives in Hernandez, on the land. The memories are so alive in his mind. But more often, he emphasizes then and now with authority. His story, like those of many in his generation, is full of signposts, many of them pointing out the way the land has changed. The road back then was unpaved. ... That store didn't exist. ... There used to be an apple orchard there.

Joseph describes the home he lived in from the time he was born until he was 20 years

old, the home his grandfather built. From one of the deeply set windows in that house, he could see a portion of an adobe wall from the original house his ancestors had lived in. Joseph remembers his grandmother nagging her husband to tear down the wall. But his grandfather refused, saying the wall was a part of history.

Joseph recounts a story that I have heard told by other addicts. As in many Hispano families, he and his siblings were groomed for traditional agriculture. But they didn't see a financial future in it. "Little by little, we had to sell the land," he says. And as the family acres were slowly parceled off and sold, Joseph's heroin addiction worsened.

Joseph was in the New Mexico State Prison in Santa Fe for burglary in 1998, when his family sold their Hernandez home for "next to nothing," he says. When he was released, the house belonged to someone else, "a stranger."

Today, Joseph lives in a trailer park on the outskirts of Española. He sits on a metal folding chair, face to the sun. The door to his trailer is ajar, the strains of Tex-Mex wafting from the radio inside. His 5-year-old son, Ricky, plays with a plastic ball in the patch of dirt that passes for a yard. "Watch me, watch me!" Ricky shouts excitedly as he bounces the ball higher and higher.

Less than 20 feet away, the telephone rings in the neighboring trailer. We can't help but listen as a young woman makes plans to meet a friend at a restaurant in town. Joseph tosses his cigarette in a coffee-can ashtray and laments the lack of privacy. Though he's lived in the trailer park for three years, he hasn't gotten used to living in such close quarters. "I didn't grow up like this," he says. "I grew up with a lot of space to run around in, you know?"

For Ricky's sake, Joseph hopes to again have land, a home, a history. "I want him to have what I had, no? And I want him to stay off drugs. ... At the end of the day, that's really all I want."

**Addiction specialists say drug use** is frequently precipitated or exacerbated by experiences of loss — the loss of a loved one, or a livelihood, or a home. Every one of the 40 addicts I have interviewed recount such experiences. And for many Hispano addicts, such as Joseph Martinez, the land is the greatest loss. It is so much more than real estate: It is the loss of life and traditions.



The loss of land runs deeper than a single generation. Nearly all of the Hispano villages in the Española Valley were settled as community land grants, first by Spain and later by Mexico. There were different types of grants, but most provided settlers with enough land for an individual home, an irrigable plot for personal farming, and the right to share common land for pasturing livestock, gathering firewood, hunting and fishing. According to the specifications of the grant, personal allotments could be sold as private property, but common lands could not. The common lands were owned by the community, to be used and preserved for the community's well-being.

The notion of collective, un-sellable land runs contrary to the American obsession with private property, and it is precisely this obsession that has pushed Hispanos off their land. It began shortly after the end of the Mexican-American war, with the "adjudication" process in which American government authorities — colluding with speculators — determined the "validity" of hundreds of land grants in the state. Only a small percentage of the original grants survived; most fell into the hands of real estate developers and speculators, or eventually ended up with the U.S. Forest Service or Bureau of Land Management (HCN, 12/4/00: [Road Block \(https://www.hcn.org/issues/192/10124\)](https://www.hcn.org/issues/192/10124)).

Today, the Valley's residents, many of whom are land-grant "heirs," complain that their land was flat-out stolen. Decades-long battles to reclaim that land are still tied up in the courts. (Of course, these lands were also stolen from Native Americans by Spanish conquerors. And the Pueblo tribes in the Española Valley suffer a similar rate of addiction.)

The cruel irony is that the land that was "lost" is still there. Every Hispano can see it. It is upon the land grants that Los Alamos is built, that developers build adobe chalets for the upper middle class. And this is the land that is endlessly subdivided for mobile homes, the only "affordable housing" for the working poor in northern New Mexico today.

Mikey Mascanares understands the irony all too well. The 36-year-old land-grant heir is homeless.

"I lost everything when I got hooked (on heroin)," he says, sitting in his girlfriend's trailer in Española. But, he says, things were changing even before he started using. Mikey is from Truchas, the once-isolated mountain village that saw an influx of artists from coastal cities beginning in the late 1960s. The newcomers bought and refurbished

crumbling adobe houses and set up studios with sweeping views of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains — the mountains that generations of Mascanares' family had depended on, not as scenery but for survival.

According to Mikey, several of the newcomers left after the first harsh winter. Others were persuaded to leave when the locals burned down their houses. "When push comes to shove, you do what you've got to do," he says. But some of the newcomers stayed on, and, over the years, many more arrived.

Now in treatment for his heroin addiction, Mikey is more resigned than angry. He can't help but laugh at his status as a land-grant heir with no land, no job, and no home. "It's like being clean (off drugs). You either got it or you don't," he says. "One day, I'll have it all again."

**Local law enforcement's response** to the region's heroin problem has been piecemeal at best, complicit at worst. Arrests center on small-scale dealers and addicts, many who are caught in a cycle of incarceration and court-appointed recovery programs. Police say they are overwhelmed, that understaffing and lack of funds impair their response to the problem. But many locals say that enduring familial and political allegiances mean that police often turn a blind eye to the heroin-related crime.

There are a handful of treatment centers in the valley, including a program that provides the medication methadone for the treatment of heroin addiction, a facility that serves addicts under 18 years old, and a few that provide counseling for addicts and their families. The San Juan Pueblo also has a recovery program.

But the treatment centers struggle mightily to meet the need, says Ben Tafoya, executive director of Hoy Recovery Program. The Valley's oldest treatment center, Hoy has been serving locals since the early 1970s, out of its offices in Española. Initially, the staff saw mostly alcoholics, Ben tells me, but these days, over half of their patients are heroin addicts.

Recognizing the changing nature of addiction in the Valley, Hoy recently opened a residential drug detoxification program in my town, Velarde. But Ben puts his hope outside the clinic: in the 31 acres of land that surround the new building.

Service providers and community activists frequently talk about getting addicts "back

to the land" as a form of therapy. They suggest that raising crops and cutting wood will help addicts feel more connected to their history and culture, and less apt to use drugs. But even though there is some evidence from urban addiction programs to support this claim, few rural drug programs are presently applying land-based techniques for treatment or prevention.

"That's exactly what we want to do," says Ben, sitting in his modest office. Through his window, I can see a thick swatch of cottonwood trees. "I want to build a model for recovery that uses our natural resources, that uses the land. I want to build on people's natural desire to create and to see things grow."

He foresees resident addicts growing and marketing medicinal herbs, among other traditional crops. "That's what people here did one or two generations ago. They grew their own food, own medicines, worked on the land." There's a lot of local expertise, Ben says. It just needs to be tapped.

For the moment, however, the acreage surrounding Hoy remains unused. The only visible vegetation is the giant cottonwood trees which pepper the hard, unturned soil. It is still unclear just how "the land," which is so frequently evoked by heroin addicts and their caregivers, will shape responses to the addiction problem.

Still, addicts residing here consider it paradise. Outside the building, residents sit at a picnic table. "It's nice to be back out here again," Marisa Perez, a detoxing heroin addict, says between drags of a cigarette. "It's nice to see the trees and the sky, to feel the sun."

**Three days before Christmas**, my husband and I drive down Highway 68. We are headed south to Albuquerque, to join my family. This is not a holiday gathering. My Aunt Sally, after over 30 years of alcohol and heroin use, has died of liver failure. We are gathering for her cremation.

Only weeks before, my mother says, my aunt called her and invited her to lunch. It was a message that she was getting back on her feet. My mother called me from the hospital, after Sally died. She could not reconcile her sister's recent invitation with the state of her corpse. "I don't even recognize her," she said, voice trembling. "She is bloated so — just like Grandma." My grandmother's life was also defined by her addiction to alcohol and prescription drugs, what she called her "painkillers."

As we wind south, rose-colored hills unfurl before us. The familiar roadside vendors are there with their wares — truck-beds full of cut firewood, piñon and *carne seca*. This is the road I traveled with my mother 25 years earlier, I tell my husband. The road I took to get away from home is the same one that takes me back.

Then we roll into Española, and it hits me how much time has passed, how much has changed. Riverside Drive is crowded. Last-minute Christmas shoppers vie for parking at the Super Wal-Mart, and long lines of cars wait at fast-food drive-up windows. The traffic thickens as we head into Santa Fe, becoming bumper-to-bumper on Saint Francis Drive.

In Albuquerque, my mother's trailer is crowded with relatives I haven't seen in years. Cousins I barely recognize hold new babies across their hips and try to fill me in on the details of their lives. We gather around the ceramic urn that holds my aunt's ashes, and eat posole from styrofoam bowls.

My cousin Crissy, Sally's daughter, says that at least her mother is no longer in pain. I wonder, as I listen, about Crissy's own, unspeakable pain. She says, at least we are all here together again, two days before Christmas.

"Family is everything," I hear someone say from the corner of the room. Or maybe I imagine it.

*Angel Garcia is a doctoral candidate in anthropology at Harvard University. She lives in Velarde, New Mexico. Some names in this article have been changed to protect confidentiality.*

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