

People We Love: An Interview with *Jenny Kimball*

Chairman of the Board, La Fonda on the Plaza

as told to Emily Van Cleve

When Jenny Kimball joined a Santa Fe law firm in the late 1980s, she thought she would be an attorney for the rest of her life. Educated at Southern Methodist University in Texas and specializing in real estate and business law, Kimball became La Fonda's attorney shortly after moving to town. At the time, the hotel was owned by dear family friends, Sam and Ethel Ballen. In 2007, after Sam Ballen died, Kimball assumed the role of chairman of the board. Seven years later, she and a small group of investors purchased the property. Kimball credits the Ballens and La Fonda for changing her career forever. Instead of practicing law, she happily became what she calls "an accidental hotelier."

Why did you want to move to Santa Fe in the late 1980s?

When I was practicing law in Dallas, it had been my long-term plan to move to Santa Fe. I wanted to live in a place where all the outdoor activities I love — horseback riding, fishing, biking, skiing and hiking — are close to home.

How does running a hotel differ from practicing law?

As a lawyer, I learned how to negotiate and take everything in stride. These are helpful skills in the hotel industry. But there's a major difference between the two. Being a lawyer was solitary. As a hotelier, I discuss everything with my team. I'm the bandleader. I need to listen to my team members and bring them to consensus. That's the exact opposite of lawyering.

Who have been mentors and advisers along your career path?

Definitely my parents. My mother was a professional administrator, and my father was a lawyer. Mayor Alan Webber has been a dear friend of mine for about ten years. He's an important sounding board for me, as well as a mentor and confidant in business issues. I also have an unbelievable network of girlfriends. I share a lot with them.

Because of the pandemic, have you been rethinking the way the hotel will operate in the foreseeable future?

Yes. None of us knows how long the coronavirus pandemic will impact our businesses, so I'm struggling with the question of how much longer these challenges will continue. La Fonda is coming up on its 100th anniversary in 2022. What's foremost in my mind is wanting the hotel to continue being successful for the next 100 years.



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What opportunities do you see for Santa Fe and the hospitality and tourism sectors as we emerge from the pandemic?

A lot of tourists have an image of Santa Fe as a hot and dusty place. They don't realize that we have an array of outdoor activities until they get here. Santa Fe needs to do a better job promoting and educating tourists about all our outdoor activities.

Is it true that La Fonda has had a long association with SWAIA, which produces the world-renowned Indian Market?

Yes. The Ballens and Ruth and Sidney Schultz, all of whom were co-founders of SWAIA, told me that SWAIA's first office was in a broom closet in La Fonda. I've always felt a connection with SWAIA. When I became the hotel's chairman of the board, it felt natural for me to keep that connection going.

How is that connection expressed?

La Fonda has been collecting Native American art since the 1920s. We have original art throughout the hotel — in the lobby, guest rooms, hallways and meeting rooms. The vast majority of the collection consists of paintings, but we also have sculpture, furniture, sconces and even painted headboards. We're proud of our collection. Once we can start offering free docent tours again, we'll be showing visitors our amazing art.