

## **OPENING MINDS AND LIFTING SPIRITS AT SANCHEZ FARM OPEN SPACE**

**By Nell Burrus**

It's January, both winter and cabin fever have kicked in. I am taking my ahijados (godchildren) Graciela and Armando for a walk down by the Sanchez Farm Open Space, bordering the Arenal Acequia, which is about a half mile from where we live in the South Valley of Albuquerque. They are city kids who don't get outside much. I want to give them an opportunity to run around, explore and birdwatch. This is also bonding time for us – when I am with them, my heart feels full.

People have lived here for a very long time. South Valley friends, excavating for new construction, have found shards of pottery and arrowheads used by native peoples who fished, hunted and cultivated crops near the banks of the Rio Grande, long before Spanish settlers and English speaking newcomers arrived. The acequia system in my neighborhood is said to be hundreds of years old.

I rediscovered the Sanchez Farm Open Space after moving to the South Valley to live next door to my dear friends - Graciela, Armando and their parents. Unfortunately, during the first few months in my new neighborhood, I experienced some adjustment difficulties. I am a walking kind of person. Daily walks come as naturally to me as breathing. When I first moved, I was craving a place to exercise and unwind, but was disturbed by loud watch dogs and the dangers of passing cars on our narrow neighborhood streets. Without a quiet safe place to walk, I was feeling ungrounded and somewhat stressed.

During the course of a few months, I started exploring the neighborhood, hoping to find a quiet walking route, even daring to go back behind houses and try out some of the small paths along secondary irrigation ditches. One day, I was walking along a very tight brushy path that abruptly ended at a road. When I looked across the road, I saw a open field graced by the forms of mature cottonwood trees growing along a wide acequia, gravel lined paths, a fenced in greenhouse, and lots of wide open sky ! I later discovered, towards the back of the property, a retention pond, surrounded by cattails and other brushy plants. Only a short distance from my house, I had found open space! For me this was a definitive turning point. Since then the South Valley has felt like home. I have made a promise to myself to come back many times, and also to share this space with family and friends, like Graciela and Armando.

A practice (suggested by a Buddhist friend) is to take a walk with the intention of viewing the experience through the perspective of someone besides yourself, perhaps a child or a dog, and

notice all the details that you would otherwise miss. Venturing out with kids, one knows there will likely be discoveries and revelations. But before an outing, there is no way to know what will draw their attention or whether they will consider the experience one worth repeating.

Today, while I do wonder how my time with Graciela and Armando will unfold, I also trust that mother nature will bring us something memorable! When we get out of the car at Sanchez Farm Open Space, there is snow on the ground and a brisk wind blowing. As soon as their feet hit the ground, Graciela and Armando are running towards a split rail fence. I have no idea why. Then I realize they have spotted icicles! The kids follow their impulses, sticking their tongues out, to directly experience a fragile frozen treat.

Every puddle is an ice-skating experiment. As a school teacher, the principal directs me to keep students off of ice on the playground (due to the risk of injury). However, today, I just watch as my young friends slide and spin to their heart's content. I jog in place, trying to keep warm, and then start down the gravel path, daring them to keep up with me.

They are fresh and curious, asking-- What are we gonna do here? I was secretly hoping we might see cranes. So far, none are on duty in the field. We cross the lower part of the field and walk up to the trail along the acequia. Cranes trill above us! We pause to watch while the cranes circle then glide effortlessly down, carefully choosing a spot in the backlot of a house just on the other side of the ditch. Graciela and Armando take turns with the binoculars exclaiming -Beautiful! There is red by their eyes! This could be a postcard!

As we walk on, the kids' attention goes to the pond. Look, it's frozen! Questions pour out of them - I wonder how thick the ice is? Maybe we could walk out just a little bit? Do you see the cracking on the edges? Graciela makes some predictions about whether the ice will hold her weight and it looks like she is going to step onto the ice. Remembering my own more youthful days of fascination and experimentation, I suggest that, instead of walking on the pond, we look for rocks to carefully throw across the ice. We dig into the muddy paths with our bare fingers and searching for stones bigger than gravel, or pieces of wood worthy of throwing.

Our first stones skitter across the ice setting off high pitched vibrations. We experiment with our different objects. My stick slowly spins on its axis as it glides with hardly any noise across the slick surface. Armando cries out as his larger rock moves across the ice - This one causes the ice to make a higher sound!

We venture around the backside of the pond and then backtrack due to a trough of water too wide to cross. Graciela says -Look! Cocoons! Now I notice that every willow bush (which I am now passing for the second time on our way back around the pond) has dozens of little delicate

pouches, each an inch long, at the most. They hang from the slightest threads. Not glossy or smooth at all, they look like tiny brown leaves that have been artfully glued together. To my own eye they had initially been invisible, as they appeared to simply be leaves of the plant. Graciela has discovered signs of animal life, I learn later bag worms in their pupal cases, waiting for the right time to emerge. What's this? - she asks, as she notices yet something else new to her, the seed head of a cattail plant lying on the ground.

And so, we spend what feels like several luxurious hours, but in reality is probably a shorter period of time, enjoying the wide open sky, feeling the wind on our faces, laughing, running, investigating, touching, noticing, wondering aloud, and appreciating the life forms and landscape of a wild place only a short distance from home. No one asks when we can go home. In fact, the most urgent question my young friends articulate is - Can we stay longer?