



TURNING THE PAGE

Larry J. Gordon

VISIONARY STRIVES FOR ECOLOGICAL AWARENESS

When Larry J. Gordon led the initial campaign to clean up our air in the '50s and '60s, one city representative recommended he be "tarred and feathered and ridden out of town on a rail." No such action was taken, and Gordon - then serving as founding director of the Albuquerque-Bernalillo County Environmental Health Department - achieved another victory for the people of New Mexico.

"They wanted me to back off, and told me that to even talk about air pollution in Albuquerque would ruin the economy and drive industry out of the area," Gordon says.

Throughout his 38-year career in environmental health and other state positions, Gordon, 79, has proven how the life of a visionary is marked by success. His campaigns for a cleaner environment led to improvements in the restaurant industry, the removal of shoe-fitting fluoroscopes from shoe stores (which exposed men, women and children to high levels of radiation), closer monitoring of slaughterhouses and a general understanding of clean air, water and land, and their direct relationship to our physical and emotional health.

"When I first visited the facilities of an Albuquerque ice

company, I was shocked. Delivery truck drivers were walking over the freezing vats in their street shoes and clothes ... Ice was dragged in canvas bags, which were never washed," Gordon says.

It was a dirty way to do business. This, along with a grade-F evaluation by the U.S. Public Health Service (Albuquerque's food program was labeled one of the worst in the country), convinced Gordon to implement an immediate "clean our cocinas" campaign. Public eateries were introduced to routine inspections, along with training classes, a list of state laws and the possibility of unwanted publicity.

When Gordon's right-hand man, Peter O. Griego, prepared to downgrade a popular Albuquerque hotel-restaurant, he was instructed to meet its manager in the bar. The reason? This manager "had always found elsewhere that such downgrading could be averted." Griego answered with a red-grade "C" on the entrance.

"Within two years both Peter O. Griego and I were awarded Honorary Life Memberships in the New Mexico Restaurant Association for our efforts in making it *Safe to Eat Out*," Gordon notes the pleasant irony.

Gordon's balanced approach to commerce and community well-being is traceable to his early years at a teachersage near the

sawmill community of McGaffey. Gordon's father acted as the principal of a two-room schoolhouse, while his mother worked as the only teacher. Gordon, his parents and elder brother, lived in a house "of lumber nailed to a frame, board walls covered by paper on the inside and no insulation." After winter storms, the young Gordon would awaken to a dusting of snow on his bed.

Gordon's father eventually transitioned into forestry, influencing Gordon to pursue a career in wildlife management. That dream would never materialize, and Gordon's initiation into public and environmental health came in the form of an entry-level position for Grant County.

"I don't think I ever had any particular long-range goals. My desire was to do whatever job I had at the moment and do it the best way possible," Gordon says.

Gordon passed this philosophy down, often encouraging his employees to pursue a graduate degree in the field of environmental health.

When the Vietnam War ended before our supply of Agent Orange, the Department of Defense planned to pump its poison into the deserts of southern New Mexico. After numerous attempts to reason with the

Department of Defense, Gordon switched tactics by requesting an Environmental Impact Statement from the federal government.

"We never heard from them again," Gordon says.

His reputation both near and abroad led to a personal career highlight - the honor of being elected to serve as president of the American Public Health

BY AMBER HARTLEY * PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVE LARESE

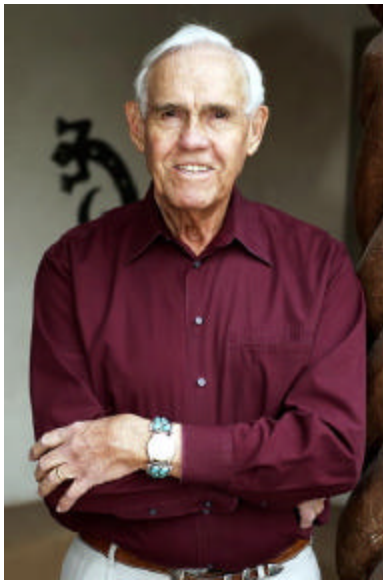
26 NEW MEXICO / MAY 2006
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Association in 1980. After serving as New Mexico cabinet secretary for the Department of Health and Environment, Gordon eased into a loose form of retirement in 1988 and now serves as an adjunct professor at the University of New Mexico.

In the end, Gordon may be remembered as an author - the kind who reminds us how to read

meaning into life. And as for Gordon, the final chapter of his career is hardly the close of a story but the blossoming of a cultural legacy.

Amber Hartley, a free-lance writer from Albuquerque, is a frequent contributor to New Mexico Magazine.



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