



## **Believe in the corn: Group helps revive agriculture at Taos Pueblo**

**By Hollis Walker**

*For The New Mexican*

The Taos News, 9/27/2012

The year 2009 was a bad one for Robert Mirabal, Nelson Zink and Stephen Parks.

Each of the three longtime friends had his own sorrows.

A major performance project that Mirabal — a two-time Grammy Award-winning Taos Pueblo flutist — had scheduled in Germany fell apart. It was emotionally devastating. Constant touring was exhausting, but without it, how could he support his family?

“It became a huge fiasco,” Mirabal now recalls. “I hit a wall, and I didn’t want to deal with anybody ... I couldn’t drive or fly alone; I would have anxiety attacks on planes. I couldn’t even function.”

During this dark period Mirabal had a nightmare in which the corn maidens — the Puebloan deities who bring life and abundance — told him they would die in 10 years, never to return to the Pueblo.

Zink, a Taos therapist and author, had been tending his wife, the artist Melissa Zink, until she died in July 2009. He let his therapy license lapse and found himself at loose ends.

Parks, an art gallery owner, was also grieving Melissa Zink, who had been his top artist and dear friend, and Parks’ wife, Joni Tickel, had been sidelined by a serious illness. And the recession was hitting his business hard.

In the midst of his woes, Mirabal sought out Zink, who asked him, “What do you want to do?”

“I said, ‘I want to plant corn, eat and run,’ ” Mirabal recalled. “I want to reconnect with how I grew up, [memories of] my grandparents’ farm, all of the Pueblo culture.”

Zink had grown up working on his parents’ farm in Durango, Colo., and knew a lot about growing crops — especially corn. “No one was really growing corn anymore at the Pueblo,” except in small backyard gardens, Zink said. After World War II and the huge economic and cultural shifts it engendered, agriculture on all of the northern Pueblos had waned. “So we started talking about rounding up an old tractor and planting.”

He enlisted the aid of Parks, and the unlikely trio was soon plowing, planting corn and irrigating fields Mirabal owned on the Pueblo with a rusty 1960 tractor Nelson bought that they dubbed The Red Buffalo. Mirabal put the word out through his Pueblo kiva brotherhood that the tractor, seed and helpers were

available free of charge to anyone who wanted to grow.

### First season

The first growing season — 2010 — was tough in many ways.

“The land was in bad shape; they couldn’t turn it or make furrows by hand,” Zink said. “We had to start from zero.”

Sagebrush and trees had to be cleared from long-fallow crop fields; obstructed irrigation ditches had to be retrenched. Zink quickly realized that few of the men interested in farming actually had experience growing corn. They didn’t realize, for example, that corn stalks grow to full height before the tassling and pollinating that produce ears occur; a few growers suggested they’d been given bad seed because no corn appeared when the stalks were short. “So then I had to give my ‘corn sex’ talk,” Zink said.

The situation was ripe for resentment: white guys coming in to show Pueblo people how to do something that once was central to their culture. Some Pueblo people were suspicious at first, Mirabal said. “But Nelson didn’t go in and say, ‘This is how you should do it.’ He listened. There was always a give and take. I’m proud of him.” “Mirabal experienced some pushback from Pueblo officials that he was undermining their agricultural program. The Pueblo owns farming equipment and charges a fee for its services. But people couldn’t pay the \$90’ fee for tractor work, he said.

Another itch: Some growers thought planting alfalfa for livestock was the best idea, “but we don’t do alfalfa dances — we do corn dances,” Mirabal argued.

Although the first growing season didn’t result in a huge crop, they managed to clear, plow and plant 30 fields of corn and other traditional vegetables, growing some new farmers in the process. Most of what was raised was sweet corn, the variety commonly raised for human consumption, along with blue and white types grown primarily for ceremonial purposes. Mirabal even took two truckloads of his first blue corn harvest to give away at Santo Domingo Pueblo, where a hailstorm had devastated the fields.

In the off-season, Zink went into the art studio he had shared with his wife and began creating jewelry designs that celebrated the corn, reasoning that the Mirabal family could sell the objects in their Pueblo store and learn to make their own designs. Mirabal’s wife, three young daughters, mother and other relatives had been involved in the corn growing since its inception; some of them also learned how to use the equipment.

The group dubbed the whole project Tiwa Farms, Tiwa being the language of Taos Pueblo, and adopted “Believe in the corn” as their slogan. Zink, who documented the project in photographs from its start, began a blog that included technical, historical and anecdotal tales about corn and Puebloan agriculture (*tiwafarms.blogspot.com*). He wrote two books that he and Mirabal self-published, *Taos Pueblo Corn Grower’s Guide* and *Believe in the Corn: Manual for Puebloan Corn Growing*, illustrated with Zink’s photos, historic photos and graphs.

### Beyond the field

From the beginning, Zink, like Mirabal, had understood that “believing” in the corn was at the root of the project. Pueblo spirituality derives from the growing of food, corn in particular; dances celebrate every stage of the process, from planting to harvest. “The way I see it, corn maidens are important to Pueblo ceremony, and if they’re not growing it, the corn maidens aren’t around,” Zink said. Perhaps farming corn and other crops again could offer more than just an income to Pueblo people.

The corn had worked its magic on the three men, helping them survive their individual dark nights of the soul. Yet something else was needed; something that would re-inspire their creativity. Zink had researched and written some notes on Po'Pay, the famous Ohkay Owingeh man who led the Pueblo Revolt of 1680. Po'Pay had planned the rebellion against the Spaniards from Taos Pueblo. Zink gave his notes to Mirabal, who began doing dramatic readings from them during his flute concerts. The readings were well received, so in February 2011, the trio of men began meeting once or twice weekly, working to develop a full-length Po'Pay monologue.

"I was living in the mountains —I do that every summer — it helps me see things differently," Mirabal recalled. He was running and fasting regularly, reconnecting heart and soul to his culture, then meeting once or twice a week with Zink and Parks. The pair "would ask me questions and I would answer them in character (as Po'Pay)," as if he were channeling his Pueblo ancestor.

Parks, who in addition to his art gallery business has long been an actor and playwright, recalled how the final piece was written. "We taped the sessions, then transcribed them, added some material and shaped it." Mirabal performed the work, entitled Po'Pay Speaks, 18 times in Santa Fe during 2011 Indian Market and twice in Taos that December. Since little was documented about Po'Pay, the play is largely imaginary and has qualities of magical realism to it (e.g., Po'Pay still lives today, in the corn fields of Taos, and comments on meeting various 20th-century people, including artist Georgia O'Keeffe and rocker Jim Morrison). Po'Pay Speaks was hugely successful; particularly gratifying was the response of young Pueblo teens, some of whom were moved to tears, Parks recalled.

But all was not easy during the summer of 2011. Zink experienced another personal tragedy: his longtime friend, David Edgerly, died on a trip to visit Zink. In the wake of his death, Edgerly's widow, Chelona and Zink began a correspondence that bloomed. This year she joined him — and the Tiwa Farms project — in Taos. Now she and Zink, in matching Tiwa Farms/Believe in the Corn ball caps, are a common sight in the Pueblo fields. She's learned to drive the tractor, but also finds herself connecting with the Pueblo women about domestic arts.

### Growth

This year, Tiwa Farms helped plow some 45 fields, and Zink has been gratified to see that more Pueblo residents are planting corn. "It's kind of astonishing — it's everywhere, a little patch here, there. There are people growing corn that we didn't have anything to do with."

By the time planting was over this spring, it was evident to all involved that the original vision of Tiwa Farms was expanding. "I kind of felt we had to get more into it or get out," Zink said. The group decided to form a nonprofit called Po'Pay Society. Parks, Zink and Edgerly were joined by Henry Nelson Lujan, one of the Taos Pueblo growers, to make up the board of directors. The Healy Foundation of Taos offered a \$30,000 grant, and an anonymous donor ponied up \$25,000 for a new tractor. The society's mission is to continue to promote agriculture at Taos Pueblo, but plans are to expand to other Pueblos, and to increase emphasis on educating young people about farming.

Lujan, an experienced Taos grower, learned to farm from his grandfather. Two little boys in his family go for kiva training this year and the family must provide corn for that he said. Some of the corn will also feed his horses. Lujan believes the Tiwa Farms project is important. "More (corn-growing at Taos) would be better, so we'd be practicing our own thing instead of watching for the corn guy," he said, referring to a corn farmer who brings truckloads for sale to the Pueblo.

Alfred Montoya, another Taos grower, said he couldn't afford to plow his fields and wasn't farming until he heard about Tiwa Farms. Two years ago, he started growing sweet corn for chicos he and his wife

make and give to friends in the village, blue corn for food and healing purposes, and white corn for ceremonial purposes, as well as other traditional Pueblo crops including melons.

As the Pueblo leader in Po'Pay Speaks, Mirabal warns, "Without corn there is no song/Without song there is no dance/Without dance there is no rain/Without rain there is no corn. If corn dies, we die. There are more planting songs than cornfields now."

But that is changing. "Every concert I do now, I take a bag of corn seeds," Mirabal said. "I tell the people, 'This is a new revolution, a way to feed your children's children's children.'"

In other words, believe in the corn.



Photo Courtesy Nelson Zink

**Po'Pay Society board members are, from left, Nelson Zink, Henry Lujan, Chelona Edgerly, and Stephen Parks**