

ALBUQUERQUE BUSINESS FIRST

COVER STORY

New start in challenging times

*Julianne Puente reflects on her first
year as head of Albuquerque Academy*

BY MEGAN MARTIN

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JULIANNE PUENTE

ALBUQUERQUE ACADEMY

Challenging start yields success

*Julianne Puente reflects on her first year
as head of Albuquerque Academy*

BY MEGAN MARTIN | mmartin@bizjournals.com

Last year, Albuquerque Academy announced Julianne Puente would be the head of school following the retirement of longtime head of school Andy Watson. With her first term as head of the Academy almost complete, Puente spoke with Business First to reflect on her journey and navigating a new role during a pandemic.

Growing up in Yonkers, New York, Puente attended Hackley School, an independent school, and discovered her passion for education. After graduating from college, she returned to Hackley and spent 14 years as a member of its faculty.



ALBUQUERQUE ACADEMY

"I had a number of roles there, I worked in the admissions office and college counseling office, I taught and I was a dean," said Puente. "Then I had an incredible opportunity to go to Jordan and help build a school that was a co-ed boarding school in the Middle East. I did that for 11 years and it was an amazing experience."

During her role as deputy headmaster & dean of students of King's Academy in Jordan, Puente discovered what her next chapter would be, bringing with it a familiar memory from her childhood.

"I remember hearing [about the school] for the first time when I was 14 because the chair at Hackley was leaving to work at a school called Albuquerque Academy and I [thought] 'my uncle lives in Albuquerque!' and that's how I had heard about it," said Puente.

"I had been a fan of Albuquerque Academy really the entire time that I was at King's ... because when you're building a school from scratch you look to other schools who are doing it well. I was on the academy website looking up some of their programs, and I noticed the head of

JULIANNE PUENTE

TITLE

Head of school,
Albuquerque
Academy

EDUCATION

Bachelor of Science
from Cornell
University and
master's degree in
American
Studies from
Columbia University

PREVIOUS POSITIONS

Deputy headmaster
& dean of students
of King's Academy
in Jordan; boarding
associate, assistant
college counselor,
associate direc-
tor of admissions
at Hackley School
in Tarrytown, New
York.

school position was available. I went to my mentor, who actually knew the previous head very well, and I said 'Hey, this position is open and I think I'm going to apply for it,' and he said 'Julianne, Albuquerque Academy is big time' and I told him 'Well, hey, I'm big time!' So I applied for it and it was just a great synergy right from the beginning."

The academy has an annual tuition of roughly \$25,000, according to Business First's 2021 Private Schools List. Since 1955, Albuquerque Academy has been educating students in grades 6-12. Many of the academy's alums have also played major roles in the local business community, such as Albuquerque Public Schools Board of Education Superintendent Scott Elder and Cyndi Conn, the former executive director of Creative Santa Fe.

After accepting the position of head of Albuquerque Academy, Puente planned to gradually make her return to the U.S. with enough time to visit her family along the way and settle in prior to the start of her first term. However, as Covid-19 entered the picture last spring, all of her plans changed.

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As a former student athlete and varsity coach, Puente, along with her staff, emphasized a safe return not only to the classroom, but to the field as well.

"I had planned to leave Jordan and stop in New York and celebrate my parents' 50th wedding anniversary and see all of my family. Then come out here with a nice transition and look for a place to live, but none of that got to happen," said Puente. "I jumped on a rescue flight on June 7th and started working at the academy on June 8th, although I had been working with the staff via Zoom since April."

While the next chapter of her career may have been off to an unconventional start due to the pandemic, Puente quickly realized the opportunities presented in front of her were worthwhile.

"The people here are amazing and very warm, but they are also professionals. I was very lucky to work with a team that is so strong and committed to the academy. I actually think our professional relationships were fortified through this and what would have normally taken a year or two to develop," said Puente. "We had to trust each other right away and everyone was willing to really think creatively and differ-

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ently. While problem solving over Zoom was difficult, I am just very grateful for these people at the academy."

Not only was Puente able to bond with her staff quickly, they were also given the opportunity to redesign a schedule that became the most efficient way students could return to the classroom. Previously, the students of Albuquerque Academy had been on a traditional schedule of seven classes a day, five days a week. Now, Puente and her staff moved from a more traditional schedule to one that would allow all of the students on campus at the same time while complying with the public health order.

"We rethought it and went to a trimester block system. Students take two classes a trimester that brought class sizes down to 10 or 11 and reduced the points of contact. In addition to investing in a good HVAC system and air purifiers, all kinds of sanitizers and safety protocols allowed us to open our school to in-person instruction to any and every student who wanted it," said Puente. "That was a great opportunity. It forced us to rethink how we teach and what are the learning outcomes we wanted to achieve, and how we can measure that achievement."

After reflecting on her experience in becoming the new head of school, Puente shared advice for anyone who may be in a similar position in the future.

"I think the most important thing is to come in humble and respectful as a learner, ask lots of questions. Do not go in with the idea that you are going to impose something but really allow [them to] teach you and embrace the culture. I just think you model for students what it means to be a lifelong learner, and that's certainly what I have tried to do," said Puente.

"I love Albuquerque, I think it is a wonderful city in a beautiful state. I look forward to contributing to it as a citizen. I moved my life here and I'm really excited about it." ❧



► Students at Albuquerque Academy continue to follow social distancing guidelines during classes.

ALBUQUERQUE ACADEMY

► Students were welcomed back to campus for in-person learning after Puente and her staff switched to a new trimester learning schedule.

