

Petchesky Ranch: The gift of a lifetime

Jane Petchesky gives New Mexico Land Conservancy a new home, the 262-acre Petchesky Ranch, a landmark property near Santa Fe Community College

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After spending decades around horses and in the outdoors, Jane Petchesky is adamant that people need public places to hike, ride and enjoy natural vistas. "It is terribly important for people to have access to nice trails and open space," said Petchesky, 87.

Her belief led Petchesky to one more generous gift in a life marked by philanthropy.

In February, she gave the title to the 262-acre Petchesky Ranch, a landmark property near Santa Fe Community College, to the New Mexico Land Conservancy.

She left the beloved adobe ranch house she designed with her late husband, Gene, her home for almost 40 years, and moved into El Castillo retirement center so the conservancy could convert the ranch into the group's headquarters.

Petchesky's generosity did not come without a personal price. "I miss the mountains," she said, tearing up a little as she sat in the ranch house at a pine dinner table made by Gene. "I miss the water, too. I don't like the city water."

Scott Wilber, executive director of New Mexico Land Conservancy, said the gift of the land and ranch house "is a milestone for us."

Wilber said having a space of its own will help the Land Conservancy grow and increase awareness of land conservation in Santa Fe.

The Petcheskys, their ranch and horses were synonymous. It all started years before on the couple's first date. "Gene took me to meet his horse (Buttons)," Jane Petchesky said.

The Petcheskys for years co-owned and operated The Guarantee store on the Santa Fe Plaza.

The couple bought the property, west of Richards Avenue, in the mid-1960s to escape growth on the city's east side. They raised their son and a bunch of horses at the ranch. Gene co-founded the popular Rodeo de Santa Fe and was highly involved with the American Quarter Horse Association. Jane liked helping with foaling and feeding. The couple rode horses all over the ranch.

The Petcheskys designed the house so mountain vistas and swaths of grass and juniper were visible from every window. The well water was sweet and the views unparalleled. The house used passive solar energy and was designed with a forward-thinking rooftop water catchment and gray-water system to irrigate fruit trees. Gene made all the pine doors and much of the carved furniture.

Slowly subdivisions grew up around them — Rancho Viejo, Oshara Village, Churchill Road Estates and La Pradera.

Jane Petchesky helped create the Community College District, an 18,000-acre planning area in Santa Fe County, and fought to ensure public trails and open space were protected as subdivisions were built. Her philanthropy spread to a variety of causes — she was a donor to the New Mexico Environmental Law Center and Think New Mexico, and a leader with the Old Santa Fe Association.

Over the years, different developers offered to buy the ranch. The Petcheskys didn't budge. At the time, they were grazing their horses on it, and that seemed more important. "I never considered selling the house," Petchesky said.

Petchesky granted a conservation easement in 2004 to the nonprofit Forest Trust on 240 of the 262 acres. The Trust will continue managing the land although the conservancy now owns it. Between 2005 and 2006, Petchesky gave a 9-acre public access trail easement to Santa Fe County to create trails for hikers, bikers, runners and horseback riders. Those trails will be part of a network planned for the surrounding Community College District.

Petchesky chose to give title to the entire property to the New Mexico Land Conservancy after Billie Blair, director of the Santa Fe Community Foundation, researched trust organizations around the state. "This is the one I wanted right away," Petchesky said. "Their philosophy and track record are both impressive."

The high-beamed ceilings, white-washed adobe walls and magnificent views create an enviable office space for the conservancy. Petchesky also left Navajo rugs and several pieces of Gene's carved furniture for the conservancy to use.

The New Mexico Land Conservancy was founded in 2002. The group's mission is "preserving New Mexico's land heritage by working with private landowners and organizations, public agencies and community groups to protect significant wildlife habitat, productive agricultural lands, scenic open space, cultural and historic sites and recreational lands for conservation purposes and public benefit."

In the last five years, the nonprofit organization has helped preserve 70,000 acres of open land in the state through 28 conservation easements. The largest parcels of land are all ranches, some of which were in danger of being subdivided and developed. Some of those landowners have chosen to preserve their property as working ranches but prevent development. Others have placed their land in conservation easements for wildlife habitat or to protect views.

The Petchesky Ranch is the fourth conservation easement Forest Trust has completed in Santa Fe County.

New Mexico is one of only four states that provides a transferable tax credit to landowners who place conservation easements on their property. Property owners who don't need the tax credit can sell it under a 2006 New Mexico law, obtaining needed cash to pay the costs of establishing the easement, to pay off debts or to make property improvements.

Petchesky hopes the New Mexico Land Conservancy also will establish educational programs at the ranch through collaboration with Santa Fe Community College. Wilber said that would fit well with the conservancy's mission.

The New Mexico Land Conservancy will have an invitation-only grand opening of the new offices and a dedication of the Petchesky Conservation Center on June 13.

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