

BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU WRITE

BY JUDY ERON

This time of year, Charlie and I usually reside at our paradise on Terlingua Ranch. By October, the intensity of the desert heat has subsided, the ocotillos hide their thorns beneath new leaves, and the hills are richly green from the summer rains. Just writing this draws me there. It's a perfect time to return.

We are fortunate to spend our summers on the coast of Washington state rather than in the Chihuahuan Desert. And we are equally fortunate to return to the desert when the northwest turns miserable – cold and rainy, sunless for days on end, with little chance to do much outdoors. It's a job to pack things up and face the 2,300-mile drive, but sunny Texas is our true home.

Yet this year we sit in Washington, waiting for some moments between raindrops to take a walk. For now, we're grounded because I had open heart surgery in late September.

In the Fall 2023 issue of Cenizo, I wrote about how health concerns had led many of our desert friends to wonder whether they could continue to live as remotely as we all do now. Such concerns have already scared some into selling their homes and thus into surrendering their piece of paradise. Is it time to leave when you can no longer hike? Is it time for me to be part of the desert exodus? After all, open heart surgery is nothing to sneeze at – and sneezing still hurts!

As I wrote that article, some of the health concerns I had been happy to backburn were becoming more difficult to ignore. That a doctor recommended I live closer to medical services during the winter months sure didn't fit with our usual seasonal rhythm; I was set on migrating to the desert for the winter. I figured I would get whatever surgery I needed when we returned to the northwest in early spring.

For years, I've had problems in my heart, which I attended to with exams and updates in the northwest. And every year, the exams and updates would conveniently correspond to our living close to healthcare. I was told these problems would eventually need to be solved, but eventually is later, and so long as that was the case, I wasn't going to let a doctor's note dictate our life.

But Charlie was worried, and he pushed me to get a second opinion. My new surgeon, like the first, discouraged us from going to the desert. With some pretty strong arguments and graphic drawings, he persuaded me to have the surgery now and return to Texas later. It seemed a preposterous idea; not in 30 years had we spent a winter outside our magnificent desert.

Even so, into the hospital I went for what I was told would be a week but ended up being three. I left with what seemed to be a showroom of medical equipment. My surgeon explained that the problem was more extensive than he had initially thought, and that if I had indeed gone to Terlingua I might not have come back alive.

Gulp.

But now he has urged us to return to Texas in a month or two, convinced that medical isolation is no longer a concern because my problem has been fixed. That puts us in Terlingua in February – just as the cactus start to bloom. What a welcome home that will be.

Living on our terms requires all sorts of compromises. We make detailed lists of what we need in town because town is hours away. We take 30 minutes to drive five miles to see neighbors because the topography demands it. We make choices, and we live with the consequences so that we can be where we can see forever, where the star-filled night sky can leave you breathless.

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standing donned in suits and felt hats in town. “This is my grandmother, Vivian Lujan, and this is ...” and he continued confidently describing each photo. Ismael displayed an amazing memory at naming so many relatives from the past, and visitors to the church who watched him came away with a sense of how much community meant to the town throughout the decades, especially since Ismael had traveled nearly 1,400 miles to be there that day.

Ismael’s display was part of the Friends of the Ruidosa Church 2023 Community Day. The nonprofit now owns the church and is raising funds for its total renovation to become a permanent gathering space for nearby residents and visitors. On Nov. 11, some 150 residents from the Big Bend and across the country gathered for the Community Day – the third annual – to get a taste of Ruidosa’s past. It was also a day of celebration as the nonprofit showed off months of work to stabilize and renovate the remaining church tower.

Attendees listened to live music, drank beer and sampled tamales on the church grounds and gathered inside to watch Matachines de Santa Teresa dancers from Presidio. The dancers dressed in elaborate feathered headdresses, used bells and wooden instruments in their performance, which combined 17th century Spanish dance forms with Aztec influences from Mexico. Also on display was the church’s original bell, which was incorporated in an art installation, featuring a painting by San Antonio

artist Matt Kleberg. The setting sun illuminated the colorful art and the bell.

The bell, thought to be lost at one point, was found in the good hands of longtime area resident Johnnie Chambers, a former educator who had taught in a small Candelaria schoolhouse. The bell then did a short stint in the old Presidio County Jail for safe keeping before the nonprofit “bailed out the bell” for the celebration. Plans are for it to ring again from atop the church.

The tower restoration masterminded by the Friends of the Ruidosa was not easy. State and federal historic preservation grants funded some important renovation and stabilization in the early 2000s, but the project was halted in 2010 with fears that the structural integrity of the tower made the building unsafe. The church was once again left to deteriorate from the relentless sun, driving winds and seasonal monsoon rains. It was clear that the church needed a permanent champion, as the diocese was still not interested in saving the structure. Years of negotiation with the diocese eventually led to Presidio County taking ownership of the church and then deeding it to the nonprofit in 2019. A dedicated fundraising drive over the past four years raised the thousands of dollars needed for the tower restoration. “The nonprofit’s goal is to raise \$100,000 in the near future for restoration efforts.”

Sanderson architect Mike Green, Alpine archaeologist and historian David Keller, and Marfa artist and adobe builder Joey Benton coordinated the complex process of stabilizing the tower walls with massive wood and steel braces

before removing and replacing bricks one by one. The work is far from complete, both for the tower and the entirety of the church.

One thing is sure: The work of the Friends of the Ruidosa Church will not be abandoned again, since its mission is its preservation. “It was always locked,” recalled Raul Rodriguez, now a Dallas resident who spent many childhood days running through Ruidosa. He said curiosity drove him and friends to find a way in to explore. “I remember seeing wooden pews and everything, but it just looked forgotten, and it was all empty and I was going, ‘Why?’”

Ongoing fundraising, possible federal and state historical designations, and gradual restoration ultimately aim to make El Corazon Sagrado de la Iglesia de Jesus whole again – a space where memories from the past are rekindled, where can create new bonds with local families and visitors for weddings, community meetings and other events. At times, it may simply serve as a quiet spot for visitors to take refuge from the desert sun and reflect on the area’s history.

“And it was kind of sad,” Benny said of the state of the church in latter days. “Because we used to go in there – when it didn’t have any doors or windows anymore – and cool off. In the summer, in that part of the country, it’s like an oven.”

If you, or someone you know, has memories or photographs of the Ruidosa Church or would like to donate for its renovation, please contact us at ruidosachurch@gmail.com. For more information, go to Ruidosachurch.org or find the nonprofit on Facebook. ■

