

# Friedje vanGils, for 40 years a driving force at Escuela del Sol and Harwood Art Center, to retire

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*VanGils started as an Escuela del Sol parent in 1980.  
(Photo courtesy of the school.)*

[Escuela del Sol Montessori](#) has come a long way under the leadership of Friedje vanGils.

When she enrolled her three-year-old in 1980, it was just a small parent co-op near UNM. Within a year, even that was forced to close when the owner sold their building out from under them.

"A couple of other families and mine went, 'Wait a minute, we just found a great place for our kids and now it's over!'" she recalled. "So, we restarted it."

Driving around the Wells Park and Sawmill neighborhoods led them to a vacant house on

Mountain owned by the [Good Shepherd Center](#).

"I went over to ask the brothers about it, and they said, 'If you can fix it up, use it,'" vanGils said. "The rest is history."

Before long, vanGils was so involved in the operation that she left her job at UNM to become Escuela del Sol's first full-time administrator and, ultimately, executive director.

Little did she realize she would guide the school's evolution for the next four decades.

The first major step: Expanding into a full-fledged elementary school with a toddler program. That meant moving again in 1984, this time into the former [Harwood Girls School](#), an iconic brick building at Mountain and Seventh that dates back to 1925.

The Harwood had been vacant for years, but the Escuela team was well-practiced in reviving neglected spaces, from scrubbing interiors to tearing up asphalt in favor of garden beds.

"It's really community-based, volunteer-based," vanGils said. "A lot of people putting in their heart and soul and mops and buckets and brooms."

In 1991, the school purchased the building outright and launched the [Harwood Art Center](#), which to this day offers afterschool programs, summer camps, and apprenticeships. Upstairs, some 45 erstwhile dorm rooms became grant-subsidized artist studios, bringing creatives of all kinds to the campus.

Meanwhile, Escuela del Sol continued to grow, adding a junior-high program just three years ago. The school currently has about 215 students, with just under 50 faculty and staff running the school and art center.

"I guess you could say I'm a little bit surprised at how long I've stayed, but at the same time, I always felt like I couldn't have a better job," vanGils said. "What could I do that would be better? Or more fun, or more interesting."

VanGils will be succeeded by Kate Chavez, who attended Escuela del Sol through her elementary years, effective August 1. Chavez has what vanGils describes as a perfect resume for the job: An Ivy League education, professional experience in both education and finance, and jobs with the New Mexico State Legislature and New Mexico School for the Arts.

"She understands the community, both in terms of Albuquerque, and Escuela del Sol and the Harwood Art Center," vanGils said. "I'm sure she'll take the core values that we've built so far and continue them."

So what will vanGils be up to next? Stay tuned.

"I think I'll remain involved," she said. "I'll stay on maybe in a consulting position for a while. I'd like to be involved in the community, so we'll see what I can do for this city that is my home now."

—By *Karie Luidens*

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