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Fall 2002



**Las Cruces Home Builders
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“Horses to Harleys”

Article by Bob Skolnick
Photography by Kirk Gittings

After meeting many, many people over a career, you are quick to recognize when you make the acquaintance of a special person. When I first met Denise, I sensed a person with a zest for life and a politeness and trusting I have often seen from long-time New Mexico residents, particularly from rural areas.

As we sat down for the interview I just knew that the life's journey to bring her to this point of success and satisfaction had not been easy. Life during her youth was centered around the family cattle ranch in Sierra County. Her grandparents, long-time ranchers with a spread near Winston, New Mexico, greatly influenced her youth. On a recent weekend the

Denise is now a successful personal injury attorney practicing in Las Cruces with her partner and mentor Angel Saenz. She recently moved into her new Sonoma Ranch home built by Larry and Rosetta Jeter. Denise's schedule is demanding and court appearances and business travel gave her little time to oversee a new home building project. A relationship of trust was established with Larry and Rosetta and the result is a beautiful home for both entertaining and private reflection. "I saw one of their homes at the annual Showcase of Homes and I liked their style and attention to detail," Denise said. "Most of all, I hit it off with them because they really listened to my ideas. I knew what I wanted and they took my ideas and applied their years of expertise."





family had their annual "round up and barbecue" at the grandparent's ranch. "It was very nice to mount up and be a part of this family tradition," Denise commented. A niche in her new home was especially placed to display her collection of spurs along with a picture of her grandfather.

Horses were a big part of her life, as well as her sister's, especially as teens. "We lived close to Elephant Butte Lake and every day I would ride around the lake and in the creek beds. I even went swimming with my horse regularly," she recalls. Her horse's name was "Whammy Chick." "He was off a track and tattooed. Riding him was my solace. He was my best friend." Denise also competed in rodeos and got quite good at it. During her high school years she competed and got to the National Rodeo Finals.

High school was a time of achievement and involvement for Denise. "I was involved in everything in high school: Cheerleader, Rodeo, Student Council, Honor Society, Homecoming Queen, Academic All-American, and Senior Class President. Looking back I don't know how I did it all. The one thing that still sticks out to this day is being voted 'Most Dependable' by my classmates."

By now you can sense that Denise is a very self-driven person who knew that there was a bigger world than she was exposed to in her youth in Sierra County. She also knew that the world was changing and women could have successful careers. Her efforts paid off when she was awarded a Presidential Scholarship to attend the University of New Mexico in 1985. The scholarship provided for tuition and books but housing, transportation and meals were up to her. A full-time class schedule and a full-time job in the off hours was a big load to bear, especially coming to a large city like Albuquerque for a girl that only knew Truth or Consequences, New Mexico and the rural county areas. Being a driven person, Denise felt a duty and a lot of pressure to maintain the grade point average that is a requirement of the Presidential Scholarship.

"I thought I was prepared, but what a surprise I got when I started college. Math was a weak point and I needed

tutoring. Fortunately, there was help available."

I asked Denise how she had selected law as her profession. She pointed out that during high school she also found time to work part-time for a local law firm in T or C as a document runner and office "gofer." When Denise arrived in Albuquerque for her undergraduate work, she got a job with one of Albuquerque's biggest law firms. "The contacts that I made with Albuquerque attorneys and judges were invaluable. They trusted me and that made me feel good." College and law school was not a time of fun for Denise. The class load,

the workload, and the self-applied standards of excellence were a burden that taxed Denise's resolve to the breaking point. Denise applied and was accepted into law school at UNM. Knowing that she wanted to practice law and particularly in New Mexico, UNM was the logical and financially obvious choice.

In graduate school the financial burden was still there, perhaps even more so. Denise applied for a Pell Grant and received a National Hispanic Scholarship. This again covered only tuition and books. "I worked very hard to secure the scholarships and grants. I am proud that I made it through and



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even more proud that I did so without having to take out a student loan."

Life continued - student by day and worker by afternoon, night, and weekends. "Law school was incredibly hard. I was one of the youngest in my class. I would wake up in the morning before class and be sick for fear of failing. Seven and a half consecutive years of college can really be a challenge. I asked God to give me the strength."

Towards the end of law school, Denise began to plan and think about what she would do once she got her law degree. "I did not want to sit behind a desk shuffling papers. I like people and wanted to be in an area of law that got me in the courtroom and with people. I did my clinical law requirements for my degree at the Albuquerque District Attorney's office. I really enjoyed it and learned a lot."

Denise's dad owns a boat storage yard in T or C and one of his customers is Angel Saenz, an established Las Cruces attorney. When Angel complained that he could not find enough time for his boat, Dad was quick to point out his "rising legal star" who was just about ready to graduate from UNM. The



introductions were made and after graduation Denise came to Las Cruces to work with Angel.

I asked Denise the standard "new attorney" question. Did you pass the bar on

your first try? "I remembered the third day I walked out of the exam. I felt like I had just been through a war. The validation of my whole life to this point was in this exam. There was no safety net left, no scholarships, no family to carry me. Success or failure - my future was in my own hands. I passed! I passed!"

When Denise came to Las Cruces, she knew little about the community and, being a young Hispanic female, had to earn respect and gain acceptance. After achieving in T or C and then again in college, the process was not over. The pressure was not off. The next challenge was beginning. "Angel treated me almost as an equal from the beginning. He had faith in me. I can't thank him enough for the opportunity." I asked Denise to describe her practice. I really only knew in general terms what a personal injury attorney did. She was quick to point out that a big part of their work is on insurance bad faith - when someone has a legitimate claim and the insurance company tries to avoid payment responsibility. "We finance our own cases," Denise mentioned. "If we are successful for our clients, we get paid. If we do not prevail for our clients, then we get nothing." Somehow I sensed that Denise would not have it any other way. This was just another challenge she placed before herself.

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Denise also handles cases of sexual abuse. The need for personal involvement in the large community problem of abused and battered women and children became apparent to Denise. She now serves as the President of the Board of La Casa, a non-profit organization that provides counseling to domestic abuse victims, their children and their abusers. She also volunteers her time at the Third Judicial District Pro Bono Legal Service Center. If you think this is a full plate, she also serves on the Board of the New Mexico Trail Lawyers Association, often traveling to northern New Mexico for meetings.

I changed the subject back to horses and asked Denise if she still rides. "Not as often as I would like. Mostly when I get back up to the ranch to visit my grandfather. My new horse is in the garage." After talking with Denise for several hours, it was no surprise to me to find a beautiful red Harley Davidson parked inside her garage. "This is my new horse. I love to ride. I'm a bit of a "G" junky." I asked Denise how she made the leap from horses to Harleys. "Actually, my mother is a Harley rider. She has her own." Denise often rides with friends on weekends into the mountains. "Sometimes during the week, after a long and trying day, I get on my motorcycle and just ride to release the emotions. Riding my Harley is my adult solace."

As I prepared to wrap up the interview, I could not resist asking Denise after almost ten years of private practice, as a person who has persevered and accomplished so much, what was next for her and what are the challenges in the future? "For the first time in my life I feel like some of the pressure is off. I like what I do. I like being in the middle

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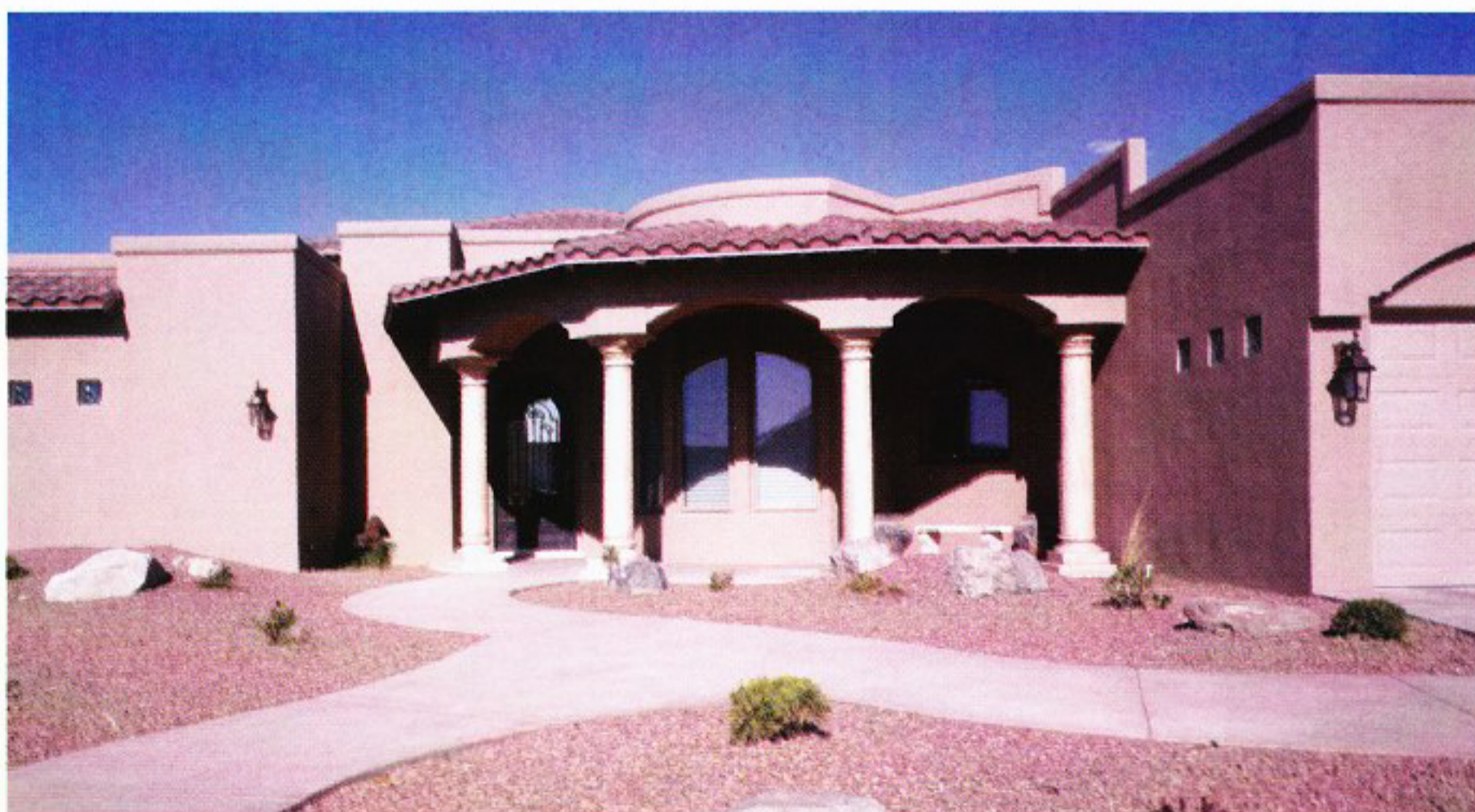
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of it all. I like being in court. I hope I can be in a financial position to take more cases that need to be brought, knowing there is no compensation coming back to me as the attorney." For parents of young men and women who may not think they have an opportunity for success because of race or economic position, Denise's life story is one that says, "You can do it if you believe and are willing to work hard."

Whatever the future brings, I know that there are parallel life passions for Denise and she will take each challenge head on and conquer it.