

# Farewell for now, but not forever, from an innovative physician



**Dr. Gina Perez-Baron**

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**By Dr. Gina Perez-Baron**

I have provided primary medical care and treated patients with substance use disorder throughout Northern New Mexico since 2013, starting at Questa Health Center. There, with the first team that believed – Patty Torres, Liz Sump, Kia Harrold, Maggie Guardiola – my Alchemy Model to treat opiate dependency was first introduced. What made it special is that we took the best tools used in fancy private clinics and made them relevant and accessible to rural northern New Mexicans.

First, we introduced powerful science. Suboxone. Intensive trauma therapy. Group support. State-of-the-art testing. We demanded rigorous honesty and understood relapse as part of recovery. We aggressively treated the five medical problems that often trigger relapse. We taught patients the biology of addiction and trauma, the psychology of addiction and recovery. With time and trust, we all experienced the true medicine of creating a healing community. La Cultura Cura.

Second, we introduced powerful ideas. The human results of an increasingly toxic world. How most people over-use something to numb our resulting ansias (anxieties): eating, gambling, shopping, working, social media, alcohol, drugs. The current personal impact of colonization, historic genocide, and intergenerational trauma. The progressive loss of culture and community, tradition and stability, land and livelihood and its effect on our safety and belonging.

We explored the possibility that wholeness survives deep in our DNA. That moving forward often involves reaching back. That delving into our deepest personal traditions – building internal bridges back to our traditional relationships, in a good way, with Spirit, with Life, with Land and Water, and with each other – may be our most powerful technology

to address our most serious problems. It was a demanding and rigorous program. Patients thrived.

Even with so much program success, expanding my Alchemy model and finding a professional home has been challenging. At my peak, there were interviews on PBS and articles in *The Taos News*; over 100 Taos patients in treatment locally, community salons and educational theater. Later, after TriCounty closed, I treated patients from a van parked off Salazar to keep them in care. At the heart of it all – my primary care patients have been the bedrock, patiently following me wherever I went.

I came to New Mexico because Mama is from here. She lived in 50 foster homes from the time she was two until 18. So originally, secretly, I had a mission to find our “roots”. What found me were many teachings. Humility in watching my patients drive miles for care. Courage to treat addiction using cultural and community wisdom. Gratitude for hard lessons, fierce love and quiet prayers. Awe at ravens and constellations, flowing rivers and fresh snow. And constant inspiration from every single one of my patients. From Questa to Taos to Española, the dirt of the arroyos and the water of the acequias became part of my DNA. My roots found soil, planting me in Northern New Mexico.

Which made what’s next such a surprise. Out of the blue, the Seattle Indian Health Board blindsided me with the opportunity of a lifetime. I have accepted their offer. I leave in May to become their Medical Director...to refine my Alchemy model, support a cadre of committed physicians, expand a 65-bed residential treatment center, promote a job training pipeline, publish research and join an amazing team. This agency is grounded in Traditional Medicine, dedicated to clinical best practices and committed to creating the data needed to drive care that is relevant to indigenous and underserved people.

Mama will stay in Taos; she too has found her home. My roots remain in Taos...as does my heart. In my new role, I have exciting opportunities to stay connected and continue my support of local efforts to bring

excellent addiction treatment to all Taoseños.

Past primary care patients are invited to meet Monday, (April 22), 6 p.m, at the Main Street Medical Center, 305 Pioneer Road, #A, Red River for a discussion on ongoing care. My patients in long-term recovery, you already know our plan. Past MAT patients and those seeking treatment are encouraged to find meetings where you feel welcome and use all the resources you can find. The seeds of sobriety are already inside you.

Deep thanks to friends, neighbors, mentors, patients, colleagues and co-conspirators. Northern New Mexico has blurred the line between server and served, teacher and student, healer and healed. We are all in this together. There is no other way.

“The opposite of addiction is not sobriety. The opposite of addiction is connection” - Johann Hari

*Dr. Gina Perez-Baron is a physician from El Prado who served Northern New Mexico.*