

Heart of Belén

Bimonthly News from the Belen Historic Downtown Partnership

January/February 2026



Art in the Heart

When musician **Tony DeNardo** was five years old, a child's guitar showed up in his house. He strummed it with wild abandon every chance he had, until his parents wisely bought him a classical guitar and enlisted a college music student for lessons. Tony made a deal with his tutor: for each classical piece he learned, he would be taught one pop song. Formal instruction and recitals continued until he turned 17 and rebelliously chucked it all.

The guitar gathered dust until, as Tony recounts with a twinkle in his eye, he realized that a guy who could play Beatles songs was irresistible to girls. He began playing again, this time on his terms, and has been exploring the power of music ever since.

"Performance is an energy exchange," Tony asserts. He thrives on audience engagement, so playing what felt like background music in a series of bars and pubs was not satisfying. A few years ago, he played a gig at Sunrise Bluffs retirement community and found an audience that listened, sang, and danced energetically. This led in 2024 to 52 weekly music events that rotated among the five county senior centers. It also led to his formation of the nonprofit **PopUpShow**; its mission is to provide free live music experiences to underserved communities.



Tony currently plays and sings monthly for veterans at Belen's American Legion Post 81, residents at Belen Meadows nursing facility, and patrons at Del Rio Senior Center, plus several times a month for disabled folks in day programs at Adelante and La Vida Felicidad. At the Belen Public Library, he supports monthly Special Orchestra gatherings, hosts Open Mic Nights, and provides free guitar les-

sons for 5- to 15-year-olds every Saturday. In his spare time, the Belen resident works at Sandia National Labs, optimizing systems and looking for efficiencies for their High Performance Computing unit.

The PopUpShow live music events have become "my Carnegie Hall," enthuses Tony. They represent his "best experience as a musician," and the audiences bowl him over with their energy. Reflecting on the value of music and the performing arts to society, he says, "It brings discrete groups of people together and melds them into a community. They dance, sing, look at each other, interact, recognize each other." He points to the physical, emotional, and spiritual benefits of music that can lead to healing, well-being, and connectedness.



PopUpShow's funding comes from individual donors, fundraising events, and the occasional grant. A recently awarded state grant from New Mexico Arts will enable six shows for veterans at Post 81 in 2026. When funds permit, Tony hires other local musicians and bands for shows.

For more information, contact details, and a link for donations, visit <http://popupshow.net>.

