

Celebrating the Life and Legacy of Fabiola Cabeza de Baca
New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, New Mexico, August 28, 2026
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Dean Flores, Dr. Karim Martinez, Dr. Laura Bittner, family, friends, and guests, I would like to thank you for the honor of speaking a few words in memory of my great aunt, Fabiola Cabeza de Baca. I would also like to acknowledge Carlos Carrillo Lopez and Karim Martinez who contributed essays on Fabiola to the NMSU ACES Magazine in 2023.² Carlos interviewed my cousin Carol Branch and me for the story. I also thank all who devoted time and effort to making this day possible. It is a tremendous honor to Aunt Faby, our family, and the many people she encountered in her personal and professional life. I am the daughter of Carlos and Concha C'de Baca and the granddaughter of Luis and Florentina C'de Baca, may their souls rest in peace. Aunt Faby dedicated her book *We Fed Them Cactus* to her brother Luis, my grandfather.

Aunt Faby's life was one of faith and family, and a professional life as a teacher and home demonstration agent that took her to towns throughout New Mexico. The traditions from her childhood that she experienced directly and those she heard recounted by others became a central focus of her teaching in the classroom and then in the homes and towns she visited for her work.

Her education at the Loretto Academy and a teaching certificate from the New Mexico Normal School (now Highlands University in Las Vegas) prepared her for her first job in 1916 of teaching in a one-room school in Guadalupe County. During her eleven years of teaching, she completed her B.A. in education. She continued her education here at NMSU, receiving a B.S. in home economics in 1929, and joined the Agricultural Extension Service where she worked for more than thirty years.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of her education was her travel to Spain. Aunt Faby looked to her roots to perpetuate the traditions she held dear. She traced those roots to Spain. She studied at Madrid's El Centro de Estudios Historicos and likely did her research at Spain's General Archive of the Indies in Seville, Spain in 1920-21.³ The Center for Southwest Research at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque has her papers, including diaries. There is a handwritten page tracing the family back to Toledo, Spain (Luis Cabeza de Vaca) and a second page referencing Manuel Saenz de Garvisu, native of Spain, which identifies family relations through descendants who came to New Mexico.

I pause for a moment to say a word about the name Cabeza de Baca. It means cow's skull; my daughter gave me a necklace as a nod to the family name. This story also takes us to Spain. During the time of the Spanish reconquest against the Moors, a shepherd named Martín Alhaja marked a mountain pass with a cow's skull. Commander King Sancho of Navarre led the Spanish army through the mountain pass, surprised the Moors, and defeated them in the battle of Las Navas de Tolosa on June 12, 1212. King Sancho ennobled Martín Alhaja and his descendants with the title of Cabeza de Vaca.⁴ A later descendant, Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca joined the 1527 Narváez expedition to North America.

Returning to Aunt Faby, her work had the goal of improving people's lives, beginning with what is closest to them and us: our home, family, and religion. She relates this work in her books: *Historic Cookery* (1942) *The Good Life*, (1949), and *We Fed Them Cactus* (1954). Her earliest publication was in 1931, *Boletin de Conservar*, a circular in Spanish containing general information and instructions for home canning and food preservation.⁵ She treasured growing up on the land in the Las Vegas area of northern New Mexico, which her family owned and worked. She recounts in *We Fed Them Cactus* her life and the lives of many like her family of raising sheep and cattle, growing food, and planting fruit trees. She introduces the book with the following:

This is the story of the struggle of New Mexican Hispanos for existence on the Llano, the Staked Plains. Through four generations, our family has made a living from this land—from cattle and sheep, and lately by selling curios, soda pop, gasoline, and food to tourists traveling over U.S. Highway 66.⁶

Throughout *We Fed Them Cactus*, she relates several stories about her religious activities as well as the daily activities that later informed her extension work. The life was hard but filled with tremendous joy as one reads page after page of a book written from the heart, mind, and spirit. She writes of the faith that was key in their lives:

To the New Mexican of Spanish origin, his religion is his whole being. Everything is entrusted to God with a faith so sincere and deep-rooted that it is hardly comprehensible to those not of the faith.⁷

Near Las Vegas, in the town of Newkirk on I-40 between Santa Rosa and Tucumcari, my grandfather Luis and great-grandfather Graciano also owned land as did others in the family like my cousin Carol Branch's family whose grandmother Virginia was Aunt Faby's sister. Aunt Faby chose to be buried in Newkirk next to her brother Luis, along with other family members including my cousin Tina C'de Baca Pacheco's mother Celina, and two of Luis's great-grandchildren of the Lucero family.

In *The Good Life*, the story of the Turrieta family has their Catholic religion, food, and activities intertwined throughout, from mother Doña Paula saying we have a good religion to foods prepared for the religious holidays of Christmas, Lent, and others, to family weddings and funerals. The first seven chapters are a story of fictional and nonfictional tales that tell of a New Mexican Hispano family's customs and traditions. The last chapter is titled "The Cookbook." It begins: "The recipes which follow are New Mexican in character; an amalgamation of the different influences which have been evident in the state since and before the Spanish conquest." She of course begins with the "chile culture." On my return to Santa Fe tomorrow, my husband and I will stop in Hatch (New Mexico, chile capital of the world) to keep up the tradition of chile culture! In the book, she gives the Spanish and English names of the foods as well as a glossary. She was a teacher through and through.

Her book, *Historic Cookery*, begins with a note of encouragement and a request.

Try the recipes. And when you do, think of New Mexico's golden days, of red chile drying in the sun, of clean-swept yards, outdoor ovens, and adobe houses on the landscape. Remember the green valleys where good things grow. And think too of families sitting happily at the tables—because good food and good cheer are natural *compadres* and because, as the Spanish proverb says, a full stomach makes a happy man. *Buen provecho, amigos.*

She concludes the book with menus for lunch and dinner and, true to her Catholic faith, a Lenten menu.

Her extension work took her throughout New Mexico. Another sign of a good teacher is that she learned from those whom she taught. Her job as told in the ACES story included teaching cooking but also food preservation, gardening, poultry-raising, sewing, and home repair. In addition to speaking English and Spanish, she also spoke Tewa and Towa to expand her reach to various communities.

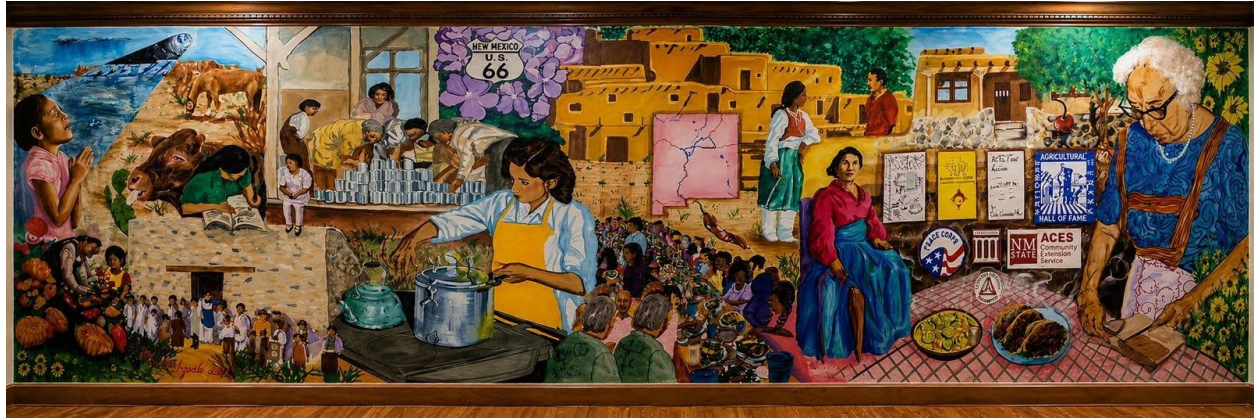
In the Introduction to *The Good Life*, a quotation captures the possibilities of her profession of home economist but also her deep love of past traditions and ways.

As a home economist I am happy to see modern kitchens and improved diets, but my artistic soul deplores the passing of beautiful customs which in spite of New Mexico's isolation in the past, gave us happiness and abundant living.⁸

Fabiola's words capture the passions that drove her to pursue her work. It was a way to preserve. She simultaneously taught preservation of food and ways of the people through her work. Making her recipes brings the past to the present and allows future generations to participate in renewal of what came before them. These practices also brought notoriety and opportunities beyond New Mexico such as Agricultural Hall of Fame membership, participation in a United Nations mission to Michoacan, Mexico to teach, and training Peace Corps volunteers.

I close by taking the liberty of sharing a few thoughts of how Aunt Faby touched my life. I now appreciate that my mother who took me to weekly visits to Aunt Faby's home did so because she enjoyed the stories of times past but more importantly because she knew that I would listen and learn. She also loaned me books and magazines, which encouraged my future education. My two children who have families of their own are raising them in the Catholic faith and fostering a love of tradition through cooking and storytelling. My son, an engineer, is working on a master's degree in theology. He will write his thesis next spring on the role of godparents in a child's life. He tells me that *We Fed Them Cactus* is already in his bibliography because of this description in the book: "In Spanish tradition, a godmother takes the responsibility of a real mother and in that way (Faby's) grandmother conquered many superstitions which the people had."⁹ My grandchildren, I have three and one in the womb so four, inspire me for the future and by the past, as did Aunt Faby. Regarding books, some of us have followed in the path of writing cookbooks. I wrote one for my children, and Janis Garcia, my cousin Tina's daughter, has published one.¹⁰ I look forward to more books and cookbooks from family members as another way to honor Aunt Faby.

I cannot end without mention of the cherry tree that was in the front yard of her home in Santa Fe. It was first, a food source which spoke to the self-sufficiency she taught and encouraged in others, second, natural beauty in her yard, and third, play for the children who came to climb and pick cherries. There it is on the mural.



Mural in the Fabiola Cabeza de Baca Social Living Center, artist Citlali Delgado, photo by Elizabeth C'de Baca Eastman, (with AI modifications).

1. On August 28, 2026, the New Mexico State University College of Agriculture, Consumer, and Environmental Sciences (ACES) dedicated a room to honor Fabiola Cabeza de Baca. One wall has a mural depicting scenes from Fabiola's life. I delivered these remarks at the opening ceremony.
2. Carlos Carrillo Lopez, "Treasured Teacher," Karim A. Martinez, "Champion for All," *ACES NM State Magazine, College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences*, Spring 2023, 21-25, 26-27. https://aces-about.nmsu.edu/documents/ACESMagazine_SP2023.pdf
3. Gilbert, *The Good Life*, Preface to 2nd edition, v-vi.
4. Álgvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, *The Account*, 12. Álgvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca (ca. 1490, Jerez de la Frontera - ca. 1556-1564, Seville) was a descendant of Martín Alhaja on his mother's side and took only her surname. *The Account* is of his journey to North America as part of the Narváez expedition (1527-1537), first published in Zamora, 1542.
5. C. de Baca, *Boletín de Conservar*.
6. Cabeza de Baca, *We Fed Them Cactus*, ix.
7. Cabeza de Baca, *We Fed Them Cactus*, 5.
8. Gilbert, *The Good Life*, 4.
9. Cabeza de Baca, *We Fed them Cactus*, 60.
10. Janis Garcia, *La Cocina Garcia: Authentic New Mexico Recipes* (self-pub., 2025).

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