

LEA WISE-SURGUY '15
Young Alumni Service Award

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“I chose Las Cruces and NMSU as part of a careful search to find the best place to establish a home, a community, and a makerspace.”

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Lea Wise-Surguy’s organizational aptitude and penchant for 3-ring binders are a running joke among her family and friends, but she had an early start. In 6th grade, Lea was already working for her aunt’s real estate business, answering phones and organizing documents, and for her auctioneer uncle, who trusted her to run the tickets at the end of the day.

Now, as co-founder and executive director of Cruces Creatives, Las Cruces’ successful nonprofit makerspace, Lea must be organized. Since opening in 2018, Cruces Creatives has served more than 9,000 community members, created 18 meaningful jobs (50% of which are filled by NMSU alum), and raised \$2,630,000 in grant funding for projects ranging from education to community art to loans for sustainable agriculture to recycling. She has received broad recognition, including the Doña Ana Arts Council Newcomer Award in 2019 and induction into NMSU’s Arrowhead Center Entrepreneur Hall of Fame in 2022.

Clearly, Lea also thinks fast on her feet. When she was three months pregnant and Cruces Creatives had been open for only 1.5 years, the pandemic struck. Lea immediately organized more than 100 volunteers and produced and distributed 8,000 units of approved personal protective equipment to the medical community, educators, and others, for which she received the Gadsden Chapter, Sons of the American Revolution Community Service Medal. Cruces Creatives also supplied thousands of educational kits, distributed with school lunches to students learning at home—even doing home visits for struggling students, literally teaching from the porch.

During her Master of Fine Arts program at NMSU, Lea’s plan to merge art and community in an intentionally inclusive makerspace took shape. Art is her vehicle for exploring philosophical questions and communicating beyond spoken language through the universal themes of human experience instead. Thus, on any given day at Cruces Creatives, you’ll find everything from ballet folklórico dancers to sewing groups working on projects for those in need, workers in the wood shop, students learning 3D printing, farmers and ranchers discussing regenerative agricultural practices, artists, and bicycle mechanics. “Creativity is part of being human, and it’s a wonderful way to bring community together to find connection and meaning.”

Although she is a determined, hard worker, Lea says those aren’t the sole reasons for the success of Cruces Creatives. In large part, Cruces Creatives was born from the grief of the tragic and wrongful death of her father, with whom she was extremely close. She also emphasizes that Cruces Creatives could have never happened without the many volunteers, community contributors, and, most importantly, her partner and co-founder, Patrick DeSimio ’15, ’18.

Lea's advice to students? "If you pursue graduate education, go where you'd like to live long term, as your university connections who know your capabilities and experience will help you turn your goals into reality."