

INTRODUCING...

Diane Souder

Albuquerque educator takes on an outside job

by Lisa Waterman Gray -- *New Mexico Magazine* – April 2008

At Petroglyph National Monument, Diane Souder nimbly guides visitors up steep paths. With enthusiasm, she describes the natural and human histories of this testament to early American Indian activity on what is now the northwest side of Albuquerque. The 54-year-old chief of interpretation and outreach for the monument tries to have some fun and learn something new every day, but she continues to be intrigued by the place's unanswered questions, such as "Why did people come all the way up from the river to carve on the rock?"

Souder is a constant here. She often opens the adobe visitor center by 7:30 a.m. She raises the flag, answers the phone messages and e-mails that have come in overnight, and then heads out into the field. Souder might introduce a visiting artisan to a group of journalists, guide a tour for an elder-hostel group, or educate elementary-school children about the nearby volcanoes. She might even encounter a rattlesnake as it emerges from behind a rock, or, on winter mornings when the temperature hovers around zero, witness the mist as it rises near the dormant volcanoes.

When, 17 years ago, Souder was asked to "come down and get things started" at Petroglyph National Monument she had already assisted federal agencies for 14 years, including internships in the House, the Senate, and the Department of the Interior. She had earned an undergraduate degree in urban studies at Mount Holyoke College, and a master's in urban planning at the University of Michigan. Souder had also worked with New Mexico tribes on planning and land-use issues, and had been a VISTA volunteer at the Design and Planning Assistance Center in Albuquerque, and at the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service, which later became part of the National Park Service.

But Souder had never done anything like this before, and wondered if her bosses knew how little experience she had. "I was asked to get things started because I chaired the National Open Space Conference and knew how city government functioned," she says. "I was to introduce the park to the community and create an infrastructure here in Albuquerque. They brought in a person from another park about 11 months later, and I worked with him for four years. He was the superintendent, and I focused on land acquisition. He built up a cadre of division chiefs from all over the country, including law enforcement, visitor services, and administration."

The two drafted a framework of what was needed in order to create the park – including archaeological inventories, and drainage plans drawn up by engineers – and submitted a budget to Congress. The City of Albuquerque and the National Park Service would jointly own the 7,236-acre tract of land. Petroglyph National Monument's first visitor arrived on June 28, 1990, the day after Congress established the monument. Now, 18 years later, October is the busiest month for visitors, and foot traffic is slowest in early December.

Although official attendance records haven't been kept, Souder estimates that about 150,000 people from 62 different countries visit the monument each year. There are now 16 full-time employees, and 6 to 10 additional people come in to help for about half of the year. Recruiting and keeping quality people, and making sure that services are available seven days a week, present constant challenges, Souder says.

Nevertheless, Souder's connection to the monument has strengthened over time. She considers it a place of 'grounding' that particularly captures her heart in mid-September.

"The colors are so brilliant, it's almost breathtaking, with the indigo bush against the blue sky, and it's still warm but with a hint of fall in the air."

Diane Souder wants to help visitors understand that the story of Petroglyph National Monument is not about any single rock carving, or even the totality of the 20,000 images etched into the 17-mile escarpment. "The story is about the heritage of thousands of years of human habitation, the importance of the volcanoes, the Native American spirit ways, the Pueblos along the Rio Grande and the integration of cultures for centuries in the Rio Grand Valley," she says. "I hope that we can change the way people think about these resources and inspire them to respect and take care of the resources, wherever they live."