

The wonder of the world around us

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At first glance, the desert doesn't look like much. It stretches out in muted colors—dust, rock and scrub—quiet and still, easy to pass by without a second thought.

But for thousands of southern New Mexico students each year, that changes the moment they step into it. They crouch

down to examine the soil. They turn over rocks. They watch insects move, track footprints and measure plants. What once looked empty begins to fill with detail. And suddenly, the desert isn't empty at all. It's alive.

That moment—when curiosity leads to discovery, is at the heart of the work being done by the Asombro Institute for Science Education.

Based in Las Cruces, the nonprofit has spent decades helping students and educators better understand the science of the natural world, starting with the one just outside their door. And they do it in a way that looks very different from a traditional classroom.

"The word asombro means 'wonder' in Spanish, and that's kind of a great encapsulation of what we do," said executive director Stephanie Bestelmeyer. "We really try to inspire a sense of wonder about our natural world, especially about the desert and about science in general for everybody we work with, which is mostly K-12 students and teachers."

On a typical day, that classroom might be outside.

Students walk through the Chihuahuan Desert not as visitors but as observers. They ask questions, test ideas and learn to see connections between plants, animals and the environment around them.

The Asombro Institute was founded in 1990 by former Las Cruces city councilman Ron Hudson, who remains a benefactor today.

“They wanted to create a place where people could go and learn about and come to appreciate the Chihuahuan Desert,” Bestelmeyer said. “We work with about 19,000 students every year and we also do teacher workshops.”

That classroom is often the Chihuahuan Desert Nature Park, a 900-acre desert landscape just north of Las Cruces. In addition to science education, the organization also hosts public activities like Art in the Park.

Asombro was entirely volunteer run for its first 10 years. Bestelmeyer became its first paid staff member in 2000.

“We've since expanded and we've got seven staff members,” Bestelmeyer said. “We're growing all the time in terms of what we offer to students and teachers throughout the community.”

The nonprofit has also partnered with Las Cruces Public Schools for the past decade, working with every sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade science class in the district.

Beyond that, Asombro relies on grant funding to support its programs and ensure access for students across the region. The organization typically works with schools within about a

two-hour radius of Las Cruces, while also offering teacher workshops and outreach programs beyond that footprint.

Instead of memorizing definitions, students learn how to think like scientists.

That hands-on approach is central to Asombro's mission. Whether instruction happens inside or outside the classroom, it's all built on the same idea: science is something you do, not just something you read about.

"The work that we do mostly takes place at our local schools with the K-12 classrooms," said Gabriela Franco, the education director at Asombro. "We spend our time with one class at a time and not with an assembly, so those numbers come from individual classroom meetings or individual field trip groups that we host. Our work is all place-based, so we focus on the desert and take things that kids are already learning about and apply those concepts to the Chihuahuan Desert. We just have them learn about the place that they live in."

Asombro staff are in classrooms every day, working alongside teachers and providing both in-class lessons and field experiences. Their lesson plans align with state standards, making the work a true partnership with educators.

“We have the luxury of being able to spend a lot of time and effort developing a lesson, much more than a classroom teacher would,” Franco said. “They might deliver it one day and have to have the next thing ready the next day, whereas we can put a lot of time and effort into one lesson, knowing that we're going to deliver it to 75 or 80 classes in that quarter of the school year.”

The goal is to make learning science engaging—something students enjoy.

“We do that very deliberately—it's cutting-edge science, it's hands-on engaging activities,” Bestelmeyer said. “The teachers are always really excited, and the students are excited when it's an Asombro day.”

That active learning is what sets Asombro apart—and why it adds value in the classroom.

“It's those hands-on activities that us teachers sometimes don't have time to prep,” said Jessica Ochoa, a first-grade teacher at Columbia Elementary. “When Asombro comes, they're ready. They have all of the tools, the sand, the pictures of the animals, the different tools, for the kids to better understand New Mexico.

“That's something that I truly appreciate. They're not just focusing on any random science topic. They tie in New

Mexico, and you can see the kids' faces light up. 'Oh, I have a yucca plant in my backyard.'"

Those lessons are reinforced when students venture outside.

"We also host field trips out to our Chihuahuan Desert Nature Park," Franco said. "Schools from right around here can come on a full-day field trip with us. The park itself is open most days for visitors as well, with interpretive signs, a self-guided tour booklet and plant identification markers."

For many students, the experience changes how they see the desert. What was once "just dirt" becomes habitat. What was once overlooked becomes something worth understanding.

That shift is part of a larger goal. Programs like these don't just teach science concepts, they build connection. And that connection can shape how students think about their environment long after the lesson ends.

In some cases, it sparks interest in science-related careers. In others, it creates a deeper awareness of place.

Either way, the impact extends beyond the moment.

"Thinking about a five-year-old now and how many times we are going to be able to reach them before they graduate from high school and move on," Bestelmeyer said. "Hopefully

some of them go into science careers and college, but even just science-informed citizens is really what we're looking for."

The work also reaches beyond students. Through teacher workshops and community programs, Asombro helps educators bring science to life in their own classrooms, multiplying that impact across schools and communities.

Back out on the landscape, the desert hasn't changed. The soil is the same. The plants are the same. The horizon stretches just as far as it always has.

What's changed is how it's seen.

For the students who spend time learning in it — measuring, observing and questioning — that difference can last long after the field trip ends.

"My dream is having every kid who graduates from school who's been touched by an Asombro program be scientifically literate and take that literacy into whatever they decide to do after that," Bestelmeyer said. "Some future scientists would be great, but almost as important, maybe even more important, are citizens who can think critically about what's happening in the world and understand enough to make sense of the changes that are coming all the time."

Because once you've seen the desert up close, it's hard to

see it as empty again.