

## A Sculpture for Remembrance

A gift in memory of Helen Schaefer harkens to Hopi ancestors.

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Look to the Mesa

Chris Richards

A new sculpture graces the entrance of the University of Arizona's Poetry Center, thanks to the talent of artist Kim Seyesnem Obrzut and the generosity of UArizona President Emeritus John P. Schaefer and his late wife, Helen Schaefer, for whom the Poetry Center's building is named. The sculpture, titled Look to the Mesa, is situated under a Texas ebony tree that offers shade on the south side of the Poetry Center breezeway.

Look to the Mesa is a bronze casting that takes the form of a woman. According to Seyesnem Obrzut, "She has no face, which symbolizes the egalitarian society of the Hopi people. She represents a people, not an individual."

Look to the Mesa is steeped in symbolic meaning, from the gourd-shaped body that represents, in Seyesnem Obrzut's words, "the oldest utilitarian vessel known to mankind" to the flat plane of her midsection, which represents the womb and harkens to the matriarchal society of the Hopi people. The corn she carries represents prosperity through hard work. The "pathos," or prayer feathers, in her hair serve to call in blessings and protection.

"She is looking toward the mesa to find answers to life's problems," Seyesnem Obrzut says. "We often look toward where we came from for our prayers."

John Schaefer gave this extraordinary campus gem to the Poetry Center in memory of Helen Schaefer, whose passing in 2022 continues to be mourned by the Tucson community.



Helen Schaefer

UArizona photo

Helen Schaefer is remembered especially fondly by the Poetry Center, which she championed over the course of decades. Through the countless hours she spent chairing the center's development council, fundraising and otherwise volunteering for the center's benefit, Helen Schaefer was instrumental in realizing the goal of the facility to house its collection — one of the largest poetry archives in the U.S. Today, the building is an architectural accomplishment that stands as a beautiful complement to the artistic expressions it contains.

Poetry Center Executive Director Tyler Meier observes that Helen Schaefer led with "a quiet but abiding strength and fierceness." She was not, he says, the loudest person in the room, "but her presence was always felt."

The Schaefers, Meier says, discussed gifting Look to the Mesa to the Poetry Center prior to Helen Schaefer's passing. Its presence on the Poetry Center grounds now serves both as a memorial to her and a salutation to visitors. It also serves as a tacit acknowledgment of the Poetry Center's notable lineage of strong women leaders.

Among them: Ruth Stephan, whose founding gift and vision established the Poetry Center in 1960. Lois Shelton, the longest-tenured director of the Poetry Center, who guided it from the 1970s through the 1980s and did incredible work to bring poets to Tucson regularly. Alison Deming, who led the center during the 1990s and helped begin the dream of its permanent home. And Gail Browne, who led the effort to secure funds for completion of the landmark Helen S. Schaefer Building and guided the Poetry Center through its 50th anniversary in 2010.

The Poetry Center is home to thousands of cherished poems that put words to the ineffable, including the works of celebrated Hopi poets Wendy Rose and Michael Kabotie. Still, no one could do justice to Look to the Mesa — nor to the legacy of Helen Schaefer — with words alone. Visit the Poetry Center's new sculptural treasure in person, if you're able, and consider the lineages that converge where you are standing.

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