

## Bill Lee's unwavering passion for all things Gallup

Written by By Babette Herrmann Sun Editor  
Friday, 26 April 2019 06:27

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### ‘BUY, BUILD, BELIEVE GALLUP’

He's traveled the globe and lived in a myriad of locations throughout his life, but as the saying goes, "all roads lead back home," Bill Lee found his home and heart in Gallup, despite living in other amazing locales such as the picturesque northwest, old El Paso and Southern California.

Presently, Lee serves as one of Gallup's movers and shakers, and sticks his neck out to promote local businesses while doing what he can to pump up Gallup to prospective business owners.

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He's the CEO of Gallup-McKinley Chamber of Commerce. And the voice on the radio, telling readers to "Buy, build, believe Gallup."

"This is home. Four generations of my family have lived here," he said.

Lee, 58, also spearheads the annual Red Rock Balloon Rally, falling in love with ballooning after meeting event founder Peter Procopio persuaded him to get in a balloon when he hosted a live radio remote some 20 years ago.

"I was hooked from there on," he said.

The relationship forged with the balloon rally, further solidified his love of Gallup because of the "great interpersonal connections and relationships" he's built over the years.

In the early 2010s, Lee left the chamber to take on a leadership role at a promising company, but he soon discovered that it wasn't a fit. Around that time, call it kismet, the position of McKinley County manager opened, so he applied and got the job.

Lee eventually left the county manager job and returned to the chamber. As this transition took place, he ran for McKinley County commissioner and won. When asked if he plans to run again, he promptly responded with a resounding "no."

"I can (make) changes more effectively from the outside, rather from the inside," he said.

## **UNCONVENTIONAL CHILDHOOD**

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Lee was born in Gallup 58 years ago. His father, a natural gas pipeline worker, had to travel for work.

So, before any childhood roots could be firmly planted in the Indian Capital, his parents uprooted and followed the pipeline to jobs that would take him on a sight-seeing odyssey across the nation.

In all, Lee says he lived in 36 different states before he reached his teens. He recalled moving 13 times in one year. The family returned to Gallup as Lee hit his teen years, so he could finish out his middle and high school years in Gallup.

What prompted the man who so many have come to know and love to take on high profile jobs?

It was radio.

It was something he dreamed about at night. While working at Levine's Department Store, he found that stocking ladies' bras and underwear wasn't his thing, he quipped. Eventually, Lee, as a 13-year-old, landed his first radio job at KGYK.

When he arrived at college, Lee hit the airwaves. He split his college years between North Idaho College and Eastern New Mexico University. Lee, a communications major, excelled at the university radio station, and left college early to pursue a career as a program director, bouncing around to different radio stations.

But, he would always return to his beloved hometown of Gallup. In what would be his last gig away from Gallup, in the early 2000s, he took a job in El Paso, TX. He considers it a blessing in disguise, as his wife Jennifer was diagnosed with breast cancer while living there.

New Mexico Cancer Treatment Center didn't exist, yet, so, his wife started and finished her cancer treatments in El Paso.

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The couple eventually grew homesick, and decided to return home and close the door to opportunities outside of Gallup for good. In 2006, they packed their bags and headed back to the Land of Enchantment or what Lee refers to as the place with the “great green chili.”

“I’ll never forget my wife calling me in tears,” he said, as they caravanned back toward Gallup with their belongings in tow. To note, as they neared Gallup, he said, the tears flowed when his wife called him after seeing hay in the back of a pickup truck, saying to him “we’re home.”

Jennifer Lee has been cancer free to this day.

“She was a real warrior and continues to be,” he said.

The couple has two grown daughters and two grandkids. Sadly, they lost a daughter shortly after birth.

Meanwhile, upon returning home from Texas, Lee applied at the Chamber of Commerce, and one can say, the rest is history.

### **COMMUNITY, CAUSES CLOSE TO HEART**

In addition to being the face of businesses in Gallup and Red Rock Balloon Rally, Lee’s passionate about cancer awareness, and veterans and first responder causes.

A horrible, recent event further solidified his commitment to area veterans.

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A veteran friend of his ended his life in recent weeks. He was a Marine sniper, who suffered from PTSD after returning home from Afghanistan. Lee met him at one of many balloon rallies he attends throughout the year, and the two became fast friends.

“He committed suicide,” was all Lee could say, fighting back pent up emotions.

For Lee, in all, his life has been about forging connections with people from all walks of life, and doing his part by showing up to community events to inspire, and share his fiery love of everything Gallup.

“This has been the most rewarding and fulfilling career of my life,” he said, adding that he’s “proud that he’s involved in creating a better place for all of us.”

By Babette Herrmann  
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