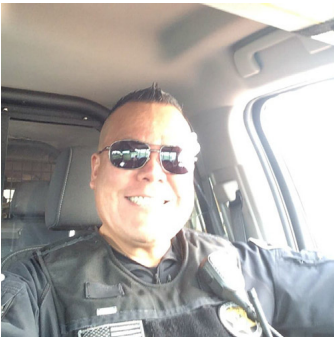


On the Spot: Sheriff candidates weigh in on the issues

Written by By Haneen Abdeljawad For the Sun
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The race for McKinley County Sheriff is coming to an end with the June 7 election around the corner.

The purpose of this Q&A is to widen the community's knowledge of these candidates to better understand how they would respond to certain situations. And also to shed light on issues that law enforcement currently face.

Sheriff candidate Francie Martinez was not interviewed by deadline, due to scheduling conflicts.

Questions:

1. Tell me a bit about yourself and your background.
2. What sets you apart from the other candidates?
3. If you could change one thing about Gallup, what would it be?
4. What would you do to ensure that people of color in our community will be protected against brutality?
5. How would you ensure the protection of our students in schools against any shooter threats?

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James Maiorano

1. James Maiorano's resume includes years of experience in law enforcement. He has worked for McKinley County's Sheriff's office for 18 years and also worked for Gallup's Police Department for four years. He is the current McKinley County undersheriff, and serves under Sheriff Ron Silversmith.

2. Maiorano emphasized how since he is currently working as the undersheriff, he knows the ropes of the job. Maiorano explained that he currently 0budgets, purchases, hires staff, and knows how to run the staff efficiently.

He has been assisting Silversmith with these tasks. Maiorano also explains how he has been an active member in starting programs within the community. Programs such as the K-9 program in the schools aim to educate K-12 students on the danger of drugs and alcohol.

He has also helped facilitate the "Trustee Program." These inmates, with mostly alcohol-related misdemeanor offenses, are permitted to leave the jail under supervision and pick up litter in McKinley County.

Maiorano also emphasized that his administration has been working to educate hospitals, care centers, schools, and major schools about active shooter responses and how to handle those dangers and threats.

He also highlighted a program called "stop the bleed," which teaches people how to keep a gunshot wound from bleeding out, plus other first aid responses. Along with that, he said there's a class called "situational awareness," which educates people on their surroundings and how to handle a dangerous situation.

3. Maiorano answered this question almost immediately with no hesitation, "the quality of life in our community." He mentioned how he is aware that many of the residents in the area do not

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feel safe going for a walk outside due to the aggressive panhandling or the rising crime rate.

He mentioned how it is essential to work with all law enforcement agencies. Maiorano mentioned that fixing these «small issues» could make people want to stay here, and make a life here.

4. When asked this question, Maiorano brought to attention the many diverse communities we have within the community. He mentioned how McKinley County has an “impeccable record” for not using extreme force. Maiorano explains that this is because of the detail that goes into training officers. They are trained in “de-escalation” processes, which relies on talking your way through a situation rather than using force. Maiorano also explained that within the staff there is a diverse group that understands the area, people, and culture, which helps with the safety and understanding of all members of the community.

5. Maiorano went right into action responses for this last question. He explained that he is currently assisting with active shooter classes, which trains teachers on what they should do in a lockdown, and the essential precautions to take for safety — as well as how to work with law enforcement in case of an emergency.

Full scale drills take place with teachers and law enforcement. A fake bad guy is put into place and the teachers and staff are trained to work together along with law enforcement and emergency medical services to put a stop to any dangerous individuals, and protect the students from any threats.

Maiorano emphasizes that if a situation like this were to occur while he is Sheriff, he would ensure that every agency and surrounding agency would be sent to the direction of the shooter and de-escalation tactics would be applied to stop the threat as quickly as possible.

Maiorano also explains how there is still not enough training and communication between the schools and law enforcement, so a plan is essential to the safety of all staff and students, and that is what he has been working on perfecting the past few years. His plan of action includes breaching the building as soon as possible in any case of a threat, and neutralizing the shooter.

Elreno Henio

1. Elreno Henio started off introducing himself in Navajo, which was a beautiful tribute to his roots and identity. Henio is from Thoreau. He comes from the Redhouse Clan born for Apache.

He also recognized his Mexican roots from his mother's side. He has been a law enforcement officer for 26 years. He has been with the Navajo Nation Police for eight years.

Henio started off his career in the Phoenix area where he graduated from the police academy in 1996. He moved to New Mexico and learned tribal law and New Mexico state law. He has been on patrol for most of his years and in 2015 he became a sergeant. In 2021, he was promoted to lieutenant.

2. Henio explains that his experience is what sets him apart. He stated, "I believe that I am the better candidate due to the fact that I work with the tribal police [and] city police. I have worked in a city before, I have worked in a county, and I also was trained in a big metropolitan police department."

He also explains that he has been on patrol most of his years and promised that if he is elected sheriff he will not be "a sheriff that stays in the office," he promises to be in uniform handling calls and being on patrol with his units. Henio explains that this will ensure he is aware of the problems and the crimes that are taking place in the area, and that he is up to date on all aspects about the safety of the community.

3. Henio is eager to work more with the Navajo Nation and Indigenous people. He explains that there needs to be more social services, mental health services, and domestic violence services. Henio wants to work together with the Navajo Nation law enforcement and social services to have clearer communication, and to assist with handling any calls. Henio stated that "I will really work on bringing everyone together — city, state, county, and tribal law enforcement — there is a lot we can learn from each other."

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4. Henio stated that he doesn't think McKinley County has a race problem. He stated that the law enforcement in this area treats everyone the same no matter which color they may be ... "justice is (color) blind," he said.

He also followed through with a story about an individual of color who failed to yield and accused Henio of pulling him over due to his race. He explained that just like that individual, he is a person of color, and both of their ancestors have been brutalized in the past.

He empathized with the individual and chose to recognize their shared struggle. He talked the situation out and explained that he committed a traffic violation and that was the only reason why he was pulled over. The individual apologized to Henio for accusing him of being racist. Henio explains that he doesn't view any particular group different from the other, he said, "we are all Americans," and he believes that racial distinctions do not serve the community well.

5. Henio explains that in a dangerous situation, a set of quality officers is essential and more important than the amount of current officers on staff. Henio explains that he will "highly train" deputies, and invest his time in making high quality deputies as well. Henio explains that being a Navajo police officer has given him the proper experience to handle situations in which there may be no backup, thus he would have to make entry, and de-escalate the situation all by himself.

He promises to train the deputies to ensure if a situation like this happens, they will be experienced and trained enough to be able to neutralize the target quickly.

Paul Lucero

1. Paul Lucero was born and raised in Gallup. His family goes back many generations and his great grandparents were Native American. He has been working in law enforcement for over 20 years. He was McKinley County undersheriff for nearly five years.

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2. Lucero recognizes that because he has grown up in McKinley County, he understands the culture and area on a deeper level. Lucero believes he will lead McKinley County in the right direction due to his understanding of the region, the people, the culture, and his main concern is the safety of the residents here in McKinley County.

3. Lucero's answer to this question was straightforward and quick, "make it a safer place to live, that would be my primary change." He emphasized how the safety of future generations relies on today's leadership.

4. Lucero explained that hiring deputies who do not focus on race or color and treat all equally is key to avoiding attacks on people of color. Lucero said he would make sure to hire the right individuals that would implement these qualities if he is elected sheriff.

5. Lucero said to avoid catastrophes in schools, deputies must have proper training. Lucero believes active shooter training needs to be taught continuously. He also explained how he initiated the active shooter training and plans before he left MCSO as the undersheriff. He personally reached out to the Gallup McKinley County Schools central office, security, and the superintendent, and began the active shooter plan and training for all McKinley County schools.

Lucero said he sought out battering rams for his sergeants, and with the help of his assistant, he put together a layout of all the schools so each sergeant has a plan of action if there is any threat to schools. The last thing Lucero mentioned before the interview ended was: "I just want everyone to know that I am not running for the title, it's about doing the job and that is what I want to do, and I want to do the job for all of the citizens of McKinley County."

Mathew Hughbanks

1. Mathew Hughbanks moved to McKinley County in 1991. Both of his parents were active

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members of the community, with his father being a Baptist preacher in Thoreau and his mother a teacher at Thoreau Middle School. He started with New Mexico State Police in 1997, and started his work with the McKinley County Sheriff's office in 1999. He worked with the Sheriff's department until he retired in 2017.

2. Highbanks replied swiftly to this question by saying "I believe in accountability, I believe in making the deputies accountable, making the citizens accountable, but in return I want to make sure that the deputies and the citizens make me accountable as being the elected sheriff."

Highbanks continued, "I care about McKinley County, I care about the citizens of McKinley County. I am not in it just for the notoriety of being a sheriff. I am not looking to just work eight hours a month and call it a day. I plan on being there for the citizens and the deputies. That is where my platform, honor, integrity, and commitment come in."

Highbanks also said that he and his wife own Red Rock Security Patrol, which they launched in 2013. Highbanks said that he understands budgeting, how to operate under an organizational chart, and holding his employees accountable.

3. The next generation will be the main priority if Highbanks is elected Sheriff. He would like to implement more education and prevention around drugs and alcohol aimed directly at youth. He wants to create more programs for kids, and even get some deputies to become mentors. Highbanks' main priority is preventing drugs and alcohol abuse, because it's tied to the many crimes committed in the community.

4. Highbanks immediately mentioned the constitution, "we the people" and how the policies behind his work will require that deputies will base decisions on the race, ethnicity, or the livelihoods of other people, and they need to remain impartial. Highbanks wants to lead his deputies by example, and discrimination will not be tolerated.

5. "That is one of the worst nightmares for any citizen in McKinley County, that is one of the worst situations anyone can be put into," is what Highbanks first said when asked this question.

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Hughbanks said that “it is a very tough situation, it is a very tough call to tell your guys this is what we do as law enforcement officers, we are sworn to serve and protect.”

He emphasized how if the community was ever put into this situation, his deputies would act immediately.

Hughbanks stated before the end of the interview that he wants the citizens not to see him as a politician, but as a statesman. He mentioned that he is “for the people” and no matter where you live, he will be there for the people and the community as a whole.

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