

# Rediscovered friends find trees, new strength

By Joline Gutierrez Krueger / Journal Staff Writer Dec 21, 2020

They were best friends since middle school, smart girls who made the honor roll, played in the youth symphony and dreamed big dreams, none of which included athletic prowess. "We were nerds," Cathy Callow-Heusser said. "Geeks and nerds," Karen Colvin added. They graduated from Eldorado High School in 1976, and as smart girls do, both made their way in the world, their paths leading them far from home and far from each other. Colvin was the rambler, moving to Texas and Missouri for nursing school and nurse anesthetist school, and then settling in Wisconsin.

Callow-Heusser attended the University of New Mexico, then settled in Utah, rambling between professions from chemical engineering to computer science to math specialist. Eventually, their paths led them back to Albuquerque – Colvin, 61, returning in 2014 to be closer to her ailing mother. Callow-Heusser, 62, returned in March just before COVID-19 put the kibosh on her months of

## UPFRONT



Joline Gutierrez  
Krueger



A medallion embedded in a tree in the Sandias commemorates the Canterbury Tales and is among Cathy Callow-Heusser and Karen Colvin's favorite finds.

(Courtesy of Cathy Callow-Heusser)

[dhanson@abqjournal.com](mailto:dhanson@abqjournal.com) Fri Dec 18

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commuting between her software company in Utah and her husband in Albuquerque, where he had moved earlier to escape the frigid Utah winters. Not surprisingly, the women resumed their friendship as if the years hadn't mattered. What was a surprise was that their paths not only led them back to Albuquerque, but also to rugged, sometimes steep, slippery and cactus-spiked ones traversing the nearby Sandia Mountains. In these past months, the best friends became beast hikers, tackling miles of trails, sometimes in snow, sometimes in blistering sun, proving that even a couple of older geeks and nerds can reach unexpected heights of athletic prowess. "If someone had told me a year ago that we'd be doing this, I would have said they were crazy," Colvin said. It began with their curiosity over medallion trees, scattered along the trails throughout the Sandias. In my Sept. 10, 2018, column, I explained that the medallions are aluminum, brass or steel washers about 1½ to 2 inches in diameter that are screwed into trees over holes where core samples were taken to determine the tree's age. A historic event that corresponds with the germination date, or GD, is stamped on the medallion. Canterbury Tales Tree, for example, lists a GD of 1387, the



Cathy Callow-Heusser, left, and best friend Karen Colvin, along with Colvin's dog Kai, prepare for a hike Friday in the Sandias. Both women started hiking this year in search of medallion trees and recently documented their discovery of all 84 trees, including seven medallion trees that no longer exist. (Courtesy of Cathy Callow-Heusser)

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year Geoffrey Chaucer began writing his tales. No one is certain who or what is responsible for the medallions or how many trees were initially marked. At present, the locations of 84 medallion trees are known.

The best friends set a goal of tracking down all of them, locating their first one – Galileo's Death Tree – in January when Callow-Heusser was still commuting. Then came the COVID-19 shutdown in March, slashing Colvin's hours as a nurse anesthetist with the elimination of elective surgeries. Callow-Heusser was still seven months away from being hired as technical director for the New Mexico Department of Health COVID-19 contact tracing unit. In a world locked down by the pandemic, the women became each other's human contact in their socially distanced bubble, and hiking became their one safe release. "It was called sanity in a pandemic," Colvin said. They started hiking more frequently, and not just in the Sandias, but also along Mount Taylor near Grants and the Sangre de Cristos near Taos. They inspired some of their grown children to take up hiking and turned Colvin's dog Kai into a great hiking companion. "We've hiked as many as 40 miles a week during the summer, and we're still hiking 15 to 20 miles a week with one long 10-plus-mile one most weeks," Callow-Heusser said. "We're very goal-oriented." They donned masks when passing other hikers and have been pleased to see that other hikers do the same. They learned everything they could about medallion trees and used GPS coordinates, a tracker and Google Maps to locate them, photographing and documenting their finds in a 23-page spreadsheet. Sometimes what they found was disappointing. They found the Robert II Crowned King of Scotland Tree down on its side, an 18-inch slice where the medallion was likely located neatly chain-sawed away and removed. The medallion was gone from the Pueblo Indian Revolt Tree, marks on the trunk indicating that it had been replaced but that the

replacement was taken, too. The Erie Canal Start Construction Tree was reduced to slash, reportedly the result of nearby landowners tired of ogling, encroaching medallion-seekers. Several, including the Marie Antoinette Death Tree and the Boston Tea Party Tree, were rotted and uprooted. That, they later discovered, was also the fate of the Galileo's Death Tree, the first tree they had discovered, likely blown down by heavy winds in August. In all, the women found 77 medallion trees and seven spots where one should have been. They found the last tree just this month, trudging through a foot of snow and cactus to get to it. But the best friends found more than medallions – they found their mettle. "We found that we can push ourselves, endurance-wise, that we can accomplish something that at one point seemed impossible," Callow-Heusser said. "We found that we are strong." Both women say they are in the best shape they've been in years. They've lost some pounds and pant sizes, too. "If we can do this, anybody can," Colvin said. "And we did this despite the pandemic." They found their way home, a friendship that endures and that smart girls usually know just the right path to follow. *UpFront* is a front-page news and opinion column. Reach Joline at 730-2793, [jkrueger@abqjournal.com](mailto:jkrueger@abqjournal.com), Facebook or @jolinegkg on Twitter.