

Elephant Butte brings Christmas to county families

'Families Come First' event distributes gifts and \$10,000 to Sierra County families in need



Hundreds gathered Friday for a Christmas celebration, lunch and charity event at Turtleback Mountain Golf and Resort in Elephant Butte.

Algernon D'Ammassa/Journal

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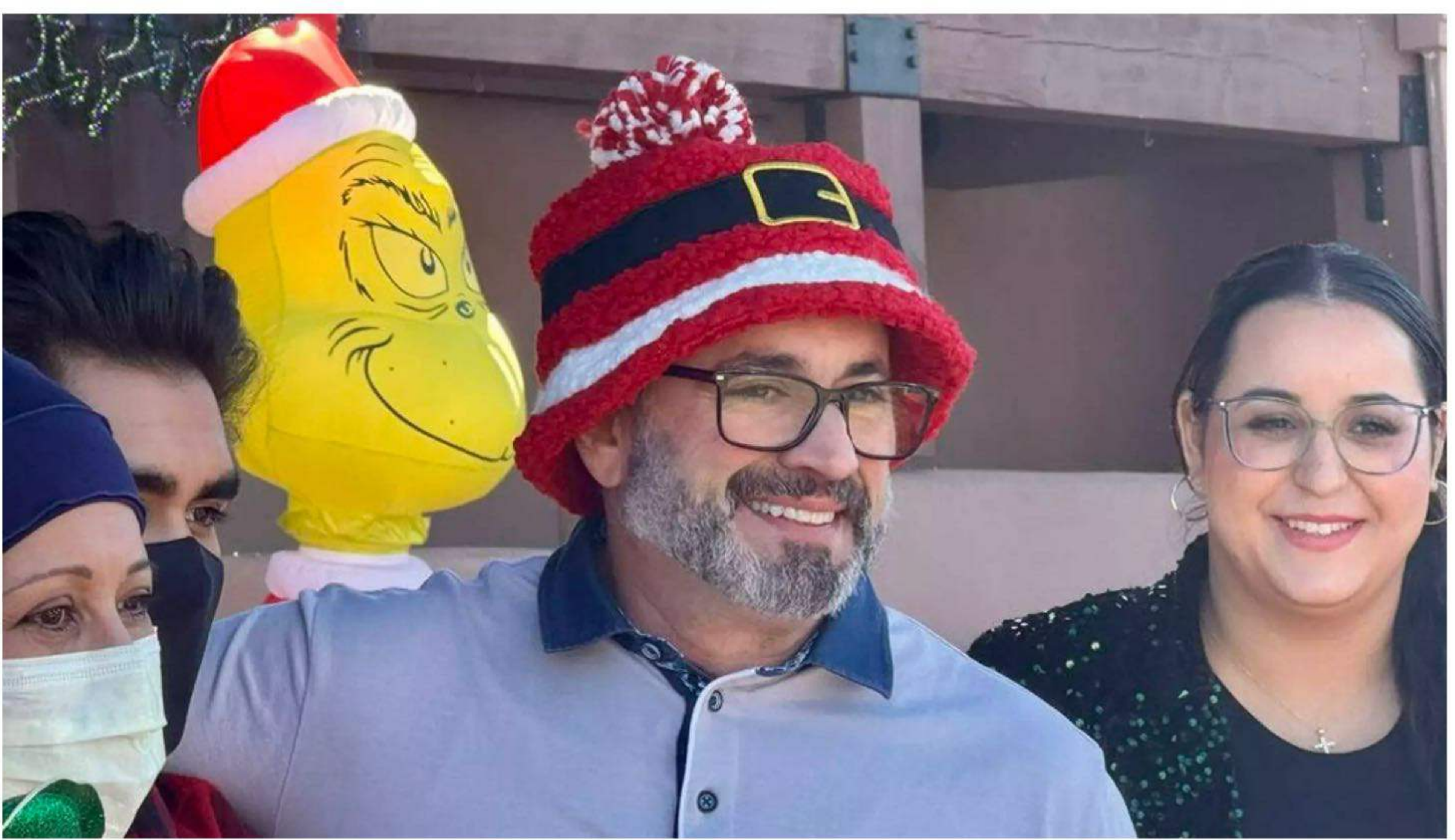


ELEPHANT BUTTE – At the Turtleback Mountain Golf and Resort clubhouse Friday, a giant inflated snowman stood in contrast with clear, sunny skies and 66-degree temperatures.

Hundreds of people, young and old, gathered for a Christmas party in front of the clubhouse dubbed “Families Come First,” where children were invited to divulge holiday wishes to Santa and Mrs. Claus, enjoy a free meal with their families and select free gifts, including toys, clothing and household items.

The event’s lead organizer, New York investor James Prendamano, quietly strolled throughout the scene in a polo shirt, jeans and a Christmas-themed knit hat. He took the microphone only briefly, to announce four cash gifts of \$2,500 apiece to struggling Sierra County families who have also extended service to others. The recipients were selected from written submissions ahead of the event.

Prendamano is the investor behind New York-based PreReal Investments, which over three years has acquired residential, commercial and undeveloped property in Elephant Butte and Truth or Consequences and invested \$55 million in development. That includes the former Sierra del Rio Golf Course, which PreReal renovated and rebranded in an early phase of a planned \$600 million investment in hospitality and recreational facilities around the course currently hosting the New Mexico Open through 2027.



James Prendamano, real estate investor and cofounder of the Sierra Community First Foundation, joins in the "Families Come First" Christmas charity event at Turtleback Mountain Golf and Resort in Elephant Butte Friday. Flanking him are Adela Rodriguez and real estate agent Vanessa Woertnik. Algernon D'Amassa/Journal

"This is a place that we felt is screaming potential," Prendamano said in an interview, citing the county's mineral resources, outdoor recreational offerings and the promise of enhanced activity at Spaceport America, located in the county, as Virgin Galactic aims to resume commercial flight service with a new fleet of space planes in 2026.

Sierra County Chairman James Paxon said he felt elated about the flow of volunteers and businesses contributing to the celebration, which he anticipated would become an annual event. "A lot of these people would not have Christmas, if it were not for this," he said.

Adela Rodriguez of Truth or Consequences and her adult son, Joseph, were among the recipients of a \$2,500 gift from Prendamano. Her life was turned upside down, she said, by multiple cancer diagnoses that left her unable to work as she underwent surgeries and expensive treatment that have changed her life. Her son put his own education on hold to assist her throughout the past year.

"It's a blessing, being able to get help that I needed," she said. "It's awesome, what they did."

Prendamano said the event came about quickly and smoothly, despite its ambitious goal of serving 1,000 people. Accurate attendance numbers are hard to pin down, but dining tables and seating accommodating several hundred were mostly full, and clubhouse staff estimated they had distributed between 400 and 700 hamburgers.

"It is the largest charity event that Sierra County's ever seen, and it's happening right here in Elephant Butte," the city's mayor-elect, Richard Holcomb, told the Journal.

Prendamano said he has organized similar events in New York state, but not at the scale of the Elephant Butte celebration.

"We wanted to provide a heartbeat people could be proud of," Prendamano said. "Gathering people is a critical part of that: I think it's so important in this post-COVID world that we get together and we get face time and enjoy our neighbors in the flesh. ... People need social interaction and having a place that you can feel proud of, that's doing the right thing for the community, just made sense for us."



New Mexico House Minority Leader Gail Armstrong, R-Magdalena, and state Rep. Rebecca Dow, R-Truth or Consequences, give away gift cards during the "Families Come First Christmas" celebration at Turtleback Mountain Golf and Resort in Elephant Butte Wednesday. Algernon D'Ammassa/Journal

The donated merchandise was purchased by the Sierra Community First Foundation, cofounded by Prendamano, and state Rep. Rebecca Dow, R-Truth or Consequences, said over 80 volunteers had signed up to help.

Dow joined House Minority Leader Gail Armstrong, R-Magdalena, in passing out gift cards at the event. Armstrong also donned a fur-lined cloak and hood to play Mrs. Claus. Volunteers from AppleTree Educational Center, the nonprofit Christian faith-based child care center Dow founded in 1999, also assisted along with students from the Geronimo Springs Alternative Pathway Program.

State Sen. Crystal Brantley, R-Elephant Butte, and her family also distributed gifts during the event.

"This event reflects what makes Sierra County and rural New Mexico so special — people who look out for one another, step in when help is needed, and pass those values on to the next generation," Brantley said.

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