



## Nonprofit Gives Founder The Boot

### The Albuquerque Partnership severs ties with former director

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The Albuquerque Partnership is cutting ties with one of its founders, but he's not going quietly.

The nonprofit agency, which works to organize communities, fight substance abuse and improve education, was founded in 1991 by a group that included Moises Venegas. Venegas served as the group's executive director until last year, when he turned over the reins to a protégé, Adrian Pedroza. Venegas stayed on via a one-year

contract, but Pedroza and the Partnership board recently told Venegas his contract would not be renewed.

"The organization is moving forward," Pedroza said.

Venegas, who said he wanted his contract extended, is upset because he said the Partnership has drifted from its original mission. He pointed to the fact that the Partnership did not publish its annual "Achievement Gap Report," which contained data pertaining to reading and math proficiency, ethnicity, retention rates and other educational factors of local schools. Two other annual reports, documenting information about public safety and charter schools, also were not released this year.

"The Partnership has always been data driven," Venegas said. "There are not many other community-based organizations that are involved in providing a voice and providing data and providing reports... and now I see that going."

Vince Cordova, president of the Partnership's board, said while reports had been a major part of the Partnership's activities, the group has been questioning their effectiveness.

"After all of these reports and writings, were they actually making a difference? Have they been effective?" Cordova said. "If you look at the records right now, are kids in the South Valley doing any better than they were 10 years ago?"

Venegas said the reports show where work needs to be done.

"Before we started doing the achievement report, there wasn't ever any sense that there was a gap. It wasn't reported. So the report provides base line data to measure whatever changes might be made for that school," Venegas said.

"The data forces the system to do something."

Under Venegas, the Partnership did regular research projects on such topics as drive-up liquor stores, which Venegas said helped show the majority were south of Central, and also contributed to Gov. Gary Johnson's signing of a 1998 law banning drive-up liquor sales.

Under Pedroza, the Partnership completed another project in which convenience stores with numerous signs advertising liquor were targeted in a youth letter writing campaign. He said the campaign led to a number of stores reducing the amount of signs. Most were in the South Valley area, he said.

Pedroza said the Partnership will continue to collect data relevant to the issues it is studying, but said it might not be used the way it has been.

"The research will continue... but the report might change, it might look different," Pedroza said.

### **Time of change**

Pedroza said when he took over last July he told Venegas and the board that the coming year would be a time of transition and change.

Pedroza has put his stamp on the board, bringing on new members Democratic state Rep. Antonio "Moe" Maestas and Joseph Miller from the Southwest Center for Family Development.

Venegas said the office staff has had a high rate of turnover since Pedroza took over, which Pedroza said was to be expected.

"The face of the Partnership does look different than it did a year and a half ago. We have different strengths on staff. That means things won't be done exactly the same, but in no way does that change the overall goals or mission of the organization," Pedroza said, adding that several of those who left did so for better paying jobs or to relocate.

Pedroza said the Partnership is taking on new issues such as immigration and organizing the city's Spanish speaking population, as well as teaching young people organizational skills.

"There are going to be differences. The hope is the changes will be productive and effective," Cordova said. "The board is very happy with this young man."

### **Other differences**

The differences between Pedroza and Venegas extend beyond the Partnership's activities.

"They are two completely different personalities," Cordova said. "One has a more combative way of doing things as opposed to the other, who is more into dialoguing with people and coming to consensus."

A state District Court judge recently issued a restraining order requiring that Venegas stay away from former City Councilor and former Partnership employee Miguel Gomez. According to court records, Venegas confronted Gomez and another man in April in the Partnership parking lot, threw rocks at their vehicle and attempted to strike Gomez, who called the police. Venegas, who agreed to the order, said he and Gomez were involved in a financial dispute.

And about a year ago, South Valley resident Joaquin Altamirano filed a police report against Venegas alleging that Venegas threw a punch at him — but didn't land it — while Altamirano was attending a meeting at the Partnership. Venegas denied the accusation, and Pedroza, who was also there, said there was a heated discussion but that Venegas didn't throw a punch. No charges were filed.

Venegas admits his style has rubbed some the wrong way.

"If you could be super sweet and make monumental changes, I'd be super sweet, too," Venegas said. "But you have to be assertive and provide data and be demanding."

Orlando Olivas, who worked for the Partnership for 10 years as a community liaison, said Venegas is known for his personality.

"Anyone who is accomplishing things is going to rub people the wrong way," Olivas said. "Mr. Venegas accomplished a lot of things while he was the director of the Partnership and by doing so, he bent a lot of noses."

Partnership board member Debbie Sanchez, executive director of PB&J Family Services, said Pedroza

is less prone to confrontation.

"Moises has his own style and so does Adrian," Sanchez said.

After the Partnership board voted not to extend Venegas' contract, he filed a complaint with the state's Department of Workforce Solutions' Human Rights Bureau. He alleged he was let go as a result of age discrimination and retaliation because he reported sexual harassment in the workplace.

Pedroza and Cordova said the allegations are false. In a letter to the Journal, they said the accusations were "groundless, untrue and seem to be intended to discredit the organization and its leadership."

### Outside groups

Much of the work the Partnership does is with neighborhood associations and other grass roots community groups, and Venegas is taking aim at this aspect of the Partnership's work as well.

"There's not as many groups involved any more," Venegas said.

Pedroza acknowledged some groups are not working as regularly with the Partnership but said that can be attributed to transition and turnover of staff who regularly attend community meetings.

Pedroza also said the Partnership is working more with Spanish-speaking community groups.

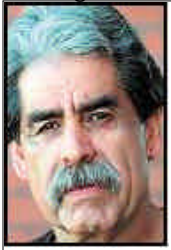
"We're still working with these groups, looking at the best way to build safe and healthy communities," Pedroza said.

Some community groups and government officials who work regularly with the Partnership said not much has changed.

Rep. Rick Miera, D-Albuquerque, chairs the interim Legislative Education Study Committee, and said he frequently dealt with Venegas on questions of education.

"In the last year since Adrian took over, he's asked me a lot of questions, and I answered them just like I did for Moises," Miera said.

Meanwhile, Venegas has started a new organization, Quinto Sol. As Venegas described them, Quinto Sol's areas of interest are similar to the Partnership's — education, community organizing and underage drinking.



VENEGAS: Helped found Partnership in 1991

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