

Recordando a Emma Barrientos

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El Presidente/CEO
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An Interview with El Presidente and CEO of

La Voz: Dr. Sánchez, let's start this interview by sharing with our readers a little bit about your background. Where did you grow up, and what challenges did you face as you were growing up?

Dr. Sánchez: I grew up in **Brownsville**, a town in **South Texas**. We were a family of 9 and were very poor. My father died when I was 14, and as a result, we all learned to work at a very young age. I shined shoes and sold newspapers when I was 10 years old, just so that our family could have food on the table. I was under a lot of pressure to work since I was one of the oldest.

La Voz: What motivated you to finish high school?

Dr. Sánchez: Although neither of my parents had a formal education, they always insisted that education was a way for us to be successful and to do the things we wanted to do in life. They taught us that education was a way to escape the conditions in which we grew up.

Another strong motivating factor was my experience as a migrant worker in high school. I worked in the fields doing hard labor, and I learned that I did not want to do that work the rest of my life. Living in migrant camps under crowded conditions, traveling far from home, working very hard in the fields—all of these experiences motivated me to finish high school.

La Voz: What kinds of social movements were going on when you were growing up?

Dr. Sánchez: When I was a migrant worker, **Cesar Chavez** was just beginning to organize in **California**, which is where I used to go as a farm worker. We began to hear farm workers say that we should join a union. As a 16 year old kid, I had no idea what that meant, but I heard people shouting, "Let's join the union, let's join Cesar Chavez." I just wanted to work.

La Voz: In your family, was the idea of going to college a subject that came up often?

Dr. Sánchez: Not a lot, but my mom and dad, particularly my dad, talked about going to college and what that could mean to you. For my mom, finishing high school was a significant and sufficient accomplishment. College was certainly an aspiration, but it was talked about as a dream way out there beyond our reach.

No one in our family had ever gone to college

My dad had expressed a willingness to work as many jobs as he needed to make sure I went to college, but he passed away when I was young. No one in our family had ever gone to college. Nobody in our community had ever experienced it either.

Though my parents valued education, they did not know what it meant to apply to college, or what it meant to get a degree. My 9th grade science teacher was the first person I interacted with significantly that had a college degree, and he insisted I go to college. And I did. I was the first person in my family to go to college.

La Voz: When you think back who were some of the role models?

Dr. Sánchez: That science teacher was certainly a role model for me. Another role model, interestingly, was a dentist that my mom took me to when I was 18 years old. One of the requirements to go to college was to have a dental exam, so my mom took me to the dentist for the first time in 18 years. He was a Latino dentist. My mom was so impressed by him, and I was impressed that she was impressed. So when I went to

college at **St. Mary's University**, I thought I wanted to be a dentist.

La Voz: How did you decide on **St. Marys**?

Dr. Sánchez: I chose **St. Mary's University** because I had spent a couple of years in a seminary. I majored in sociology.

La Voz: When did the idea of graduate school enter your mind?

Dr. Sánchez: The idea of graduate school came up while I was finishing my bachelor's degree. I was walking to class when a Latino guy asked me what my plans were after graduation? Remember, this was in the 1970s, and there were lots of efforts to recruit minorities. This guy had a Master's in Social Work and was recruiting for the **Graduate School of Social Work at the University of Washington in Seattle**. Social work sounded very interesting to me, so I applied and got a full scholarship. I packed my bags in a **Volkswagen** bug, and much to my mom's disapproval, moved to **Seattle**.

La Voz: Did you like **Seattle**?

As a Latino, getting out of Texas was one of the best things I could have done.

Dr. Sánchez: **Seattle** was a real social consciousness-builder for me. As a Latino, getting out of **Texas** was one of the best things I could have done. In **Seattle**, the Latinos, African Americans, and Native Americans were so well organized. They fought for more minority students to be admitted into colleges, and for more scholarships and support for minority students. There were also incredible Latino professors, writers, poets, and

activists who wanted to change the world.

That's where I met **Cesar Chavez**, **Reies Tijerina**, **Corky Gonzales**, and **José Angel Gutierrez**. If I had to look at a time in my life that had the most significant impact, it was those one-and-a-half years in **Seattle**.

La Voz: How was it you selected **Harvard University**?

Dr. Sánchez: When I was getting my Master's in Social Work, I was trying to figure out what I was going to do with all the education I had. I decided that I wanted to focus on education because as I looked across the country, I saw that education was one of the most critical needs Latinos had.

Harvard was the only school I had applied to.

I wanted to have a degree from a reputable institution, so I applied to **Harvard**. In fact, **Harvard** was the only school I had applied to. My dissertation focused on Chicano alternative schools in the Southwest. There were only 3 of them in the country at that time.

La Voz: What was it like to be one of the first Chicanos to receive a doctorate from the **Graduate School of Education at Harvard**?

Dr. Sánchez: I did not realize that I was one of the first, although when I looked around there were very few Latinos at the doctorate level. Many had started in the graduate school but did not finish. When it came time to graduate, I wore a sarape instead of my cap and gown, and they almost did not let me walk across the stage in until I showed them my ID!

La Voz: With your doctorate in hand, were there a lot of job offers that came your way?

I was very fortunate and almost never had to look for a job. I was called about various job offers, and I chose to work as the Director of **La Esperanza Home for Boys in South Texas**. I chose that opportunity because the board of directors wanted to build its own alternative school. We built our own accredited school while I was there.

La Voz: How did you decide to start **Southwest Key**?

Dr. Sánchez: After six and a half years in **Brownsville**, I decided to start this non profit, which was then called **Texas Key**. I had been directing a residential facility for kids. We would take kids who were in trouble and taught them to live in our facility. Then we would let them go home. Within 30 days, a lot of these kids were back in the juvenile justice system or in our facility. I thought to myself, "This does not work."

I decided to visit similar programs across the country. I saw that the majority of the kids being locked up were Latino or African American kids who had committed non violent offenses. These kids did not have any other option but to be



"That is how a couple of friends and I started looking at alternatives to incarceration for kids"

Dr. Juan Sánchez

Southwest Key Programs

incarcerated. That is how a couple of friends and I started looking at alternatives to incarceration for kids. I wrote a grant proposal to the state and got funded.

La Voz: Looking back, what was the biggest challenge in launching **Southwest Key**?

Starting this non profit was a risky move. I was married and had three kids and was the only one employed in the family. I was jumping into something for which I had no money and no guarantees whatsoever, but I thought it was a great idea.

I took a significant cut in pay from my already moderate salary, but I knew it was the right thing to be doing. I believed in it so much that I knew once people learned about the work we were doing to keep kids out of jail, and that we were doing it effectively, the idea would catch on. And it did!

La Voz: What beliefs and principles guide **Southwest Key's** work?

We believe that all children deserve to live in a community where they are safe and where they can be successful and fulfill their dreams. To give children this opportunity, we must open the doors to a quality education. We also believe that the



"Our efforts focus on investing in a community where historically ."

young people we work with, despite how challenging their circumstances may be, have the ability and the intelligence to finish high school, go to college, and achieve the goals they have for themselves. Finally, we believe that this work must be led by people who represent the people we are serving, and we are proud that our entire agency is led by professionals of color, as the majority of the kids we serve are kids of color.

La Voz: How did the organization decide to locate its national headquarters in **East Austin**?

"Southwest Key serves our community—we do not just work here"

We received this land in the **Govalle/Johnston Terrace** neighborhood of **East Austin** as a donation. When we secured the land, we began working with community leaders and residents to determine what they wanted to see here - which is why we have a **Boys and Girls Club**, offer **GED/ESL** classes, have a community meeting space and computer lab - as well as the middle school - it all came from them. Their challenge to us was that if we really wanted to be a part of this community and participate in its transformation, then we should move our headquarters to this neighborhood. So we did.

La Voz: What services are available at the **Southwest Key's El Centro de Familia**?

Dr. Sánchez: **El Centro de Familia** offers employment support, leadership development and community organizing activities, health and wellness education, homeownership services, and our very own middle school, the East Austin College Prep Academy. We

are proud to work with community partners to offer these services.

La Voz: How do you keep the grassroots community involved in **SWK's** community initiatives?

Dr. Sánchez: **Southwest Key** serves our community—we do not just work here. Integrating members of the community, as well as their input into our work, is very important to us. We formed a Community Development Advisory Council approximately seven years ago, which is composed of some of the longest-standing and most respected leaders in East Austin.

Our **East Austin Leadership Development Program** recruits and develops future grassroots leaders from the community. These individuals provide constant feedback about **Southwest Key's** community initiatives and are involved in decisions affecting their neighborhood and their lives.

We also periodically conduct door-to-door surveys to seek input from our neighbors and ask what they need and want – and then we focus our efforts around this input.

La Voz: We have been hearing a lot about the **Harlem Children Zone Project** and about those who want to bring this project to **Austin**. Tell us about **Southwest Key's** interest in this project.

Dr. Sánchez: The **Harlem Children's Zone** has been receiving significant attention as a result of **President Obama's Promise Neighborhoods Program**. Through this program, the federal government will provide funding to 20 cities across the country to replicate the **HCZ** model, a neighborhood revitalization initiative that focuses on the success of children. This model and others have demonstrated that

when disadvantaged children and families are given opportunities to succeed, they do!

As I mentioned, we have been doing similar work in the **Govalle/Johnston Terrace Neighborhood** for years. This federal initiative gives us the opportunity to accelerate our already-existing efforts here. In fact, we have formally launched the East Austin Children's Promise to provide a comprehensive support network that will transform East Austin, one neighborhood at a time.

La Voz: Does **Southwest Key** believe that the **HCZ** project can be replicated here in **Austin**?

Dr. Sánchez: Absolutely. The need for significant investment in **East Austin**, particularly in the **Govalle/Johnston Terrace Neighborhood**, could not be clearer. Our community has a rich history of organizing and has supported **Southwest Key** to become a vital force for positive change in **East Austin**. We have all the components in place to lead the **East Austin Children's Promise**.

La Voz: It is my understanding that community organizing is a key component of the **HCZ** – how will the work that **SWK** has been doing in partnership with the **Govalle/Johnston Terrace** community associations, such as the leadership program and the "Vota" campaign, be enhanced through the replication of the model?

Dr. Sánchez: Community members and community associations have long been organized in the **Govalle/Johnston Terrace Neighborhood** and **Southwest Key** has been able to accelerate and broaden the depth of this work. The replication of the **HCZ** model as the East Austin Children's Promise will provide additional resources and connect the

organizing efforts to service delivery, which is where we can see more significant systemic change happen.

La Voz: What happens if Austin or **SWK** does not get this grant?

Dr. Sánchez: Austin will be challenged when competing against cities that have garnered much more national attention such as **Detroit** and **New Orleans** for issues related to poverty, unemployment, and a lack of opportunity for young people. So the process will be highly competitive, but we will do our best to demonstrate the needs of **East Austin**, as well as the potential of our well-organized community and the capacity of **Southwest Key** to lead this effort. But grant or no grant, we will continue our work in the **Govalle/Johnston Terrace Neighborhood**. We already have seven years invested in our neighborhood, work begun well before this federal initiative was announced.

La Voz: What kind of difference do you think this initiative will ultimately make for the lives of children in our communities with high needs?

Dr. Sánchez: Our efforts focus on investing in a community where, historically, a large portion of children have not been very successful in the existing public school system. We are going to provide an opportunity for these kids to develop the knowledge and skills they need to be academically successful and the self-confidence to aspire high.

We are simply not going to let children in this Children's Promise neighborhood fail any longer. We are not going to let them fail in school or get caught up in the juvenile justice system. We are going to eventually eliminate poverty in this community because our kids are going to graduate from college and have secure and desirable futures.

La Voz: Pues, muchas gracias por haber tomado el tiempo para hacer esta entrevista.

Dr. Sánchez: No, de veras fue un placer para mi. Gracias a usted.