

Taking a Chance, Finding a New Path

An entrepreneur discovers his calling in education

by ZEUS RODRIGUEZ

IN THE SUMMER OF 2011, my wife Dana and I had a lot going on. For the previous 11 years, I had worked at our medical-staffing company, both as CEO and as a certified first assistant in cardiothoracic surgery. Hispanics for School Choice, the nonprofit I had formed to help Latino families in Milwaukee navigate their education options, was celebrating its second anniversary. And Dana, a pediatric nurse practitioner, had just decided to pursue a PhD at Marquette University. So when she suggested that I apply to become president of St. Anthony, our son's school, I didn't take her seriously. I was an entrepreneur, not an educator!

The priest at St. Anthony Parish had asked me to help him find a new president for the school. I had gotten to know him and St. Anthony School primarily through my efforts with Hispanics for School Choice. Since our nonprofit served the Latino community, it was natural for us to form an alliance with the largest Latino elementary school in Wisconsin. St. Anthony, with nearly 1,400 students at the time, was 99 percent Latino, and nearly all of its students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch. Only about a dozen students, including my child, attended the school without the support of a state-funded voucher.

We had been searching for a new president for several months when Dana repeated her earlier suggestion. "You really should be president," she said. "You're perfect for the job." This time I took her seriously.

But how could I lead a school? I had no experience in education leadership. However, I did have a mentor who had always told me to listen to my wife, especially when it came to career moves, because "a wife like Dana will not lead you astray." So I applied for the job, and the school hired me.

Founded in 1872, St. Anthony was a traditional Catholic school in most ways. Mass and Confession were offered every week, students wore uniforms, classrooms were orderly, the curriculum was classical, and the love for children was palpable. People at the school believed in educating the whole child: mind, body, and spirit. The previous president had successfully expanded the enrollment from 200 to 1,400 students in just over eight years, and the school was in the process of adding a high school. Keeping up with such rapid change was

challenging for faculty and staff, but their students came from some of the most economically disadvantaged families in the state, and they did not see failure as an option.

To my surprise, my entrepreneurial spirit served me well as I took over leadership of the school. Funding our programs was always a challenge. As an entrepreneur, I was able to step outside of the traditional ways of thinking in education and consider a range of fresh options for financing new initiatives. St. Anthony was able to add a pediatric health clinic, the nation's first at an independent Catholic school, by utilizing BadgerCare, Wisconsin's Medicaid program. Similarly, we tapped into funds from the state's childcare subsidy system to support a new early-childhood program at the school.

Because the per-pupil voucher amount our students received from the state had not increased in more than five years, we had no reserves to fall back on, and no endowment. So when I initially proposed the new programs, it raised eyebrows. It wasn't easy to convince our stakeholders to leverage our century-old buildings to secure a \$500,000 loan to start the early-childhood component. My experience launching and sustaining multiple small businesses enabled me to walk our stakeholders through the process and help them understand the risks and potential rewards of our endeavor. It also gave the lender confidence that we understood how to run a business.

The risks paid off. Over the next three years, St. Anthony grew to more than 2,000 students, and test scores improved. More than 90 percent of the students in our first two graduating classes went on to college.

For me, deciding to leave St. Anthony was hard, but the need to move on to other projects is in an entrepreneur's blood. I'm thankful to our students, families, and amazing staff for helping me realize my vocation and making our school a model of success. And above all, I learned my most valuable lesson—to listen to my wife.

Zeus Rodriguez is president of Rodriguez Corp and Hispanics for School Choice, both based in Phoenix, Arizona.



When my wife suggested that I apply to become president of our son's school, I didn't take her seriously. I was an entrepreneur, not an educator.