

Training effort seeks to build next generation of Latino leaders in Sonoma Valley

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Sal Chavez said he had never been to a meeting of the Sonoma Valley school board, much less considered serving on it, when Camerino Hawing encouraged him four years ago to apply for the seat Hawing was vacating.

Chavez had been working at the front counter of his family's cafe in El Verano. He said the former school board trustee saw something in him that he had not at that time: someone who could make change and empower the local Latino community.

He started to attend meetings and study up on school issues. Appointed to the seat in 2011 and subsequently elected to a four-year term after running uncontested last year, Chavez currently is the only Latino on the board of trustees in a school district where more than half the students are Hispanic. He also has taken on other roles in the area, including serving as a board member of La Luz Center. It all began with Hawing "tapping" him on the shoulder four years ago.

"I credit him for picking me out of the bunch," Chavez said.

To encourage other Latinos to take on public and nonprofit leadership positions in Sonoma Valley, Chavez reached out to Juan Hernandez, executive director of La Luz Center in Boyes Hot Springs.

They're teaming up this weekend with coaches from the locally based, nationally recognized Sonoma Leadership Systems to provide free leadership training to more than a dozen Latinos, many of them already considered successful in their careers.

“I feel obligated to get people involved,” said the 29-year-old Chavez, who also runs a business importing wines and spirits.

He said more than 100 nonprofits serve Sonoma Valley but few of them have Latinos on their boards. It’s not that they lack the desire to have a diverse board, he said. Latinos just aren’t aware they’re needed for those positions, he said.

The Boys and Girls Club of Sonoma Valley is focused on having a board that better reflects the community it serves, development and marketing director Rachel Cusick said. It hasn’t been easy, though. Of the current 12 board members, none are Latino. The group hopes to change that by the end of the year, she said.

“We know that the Latino community is incredibly generous and are huge supporters of what we do. They give of their time and money,” Cusick said. “I don’t know where the disconnect comes with the board leadership. We’re exploring it.”

She was encouraged to hear about the leadership training. There are at least five open seats on the Boys and Girls Club board. They hope to attract Latino candidates, said Cusick, adding that half of the 2,300 children the local club served last year considered themselves Hispanic or Latino.

While Latino participation has increased in Santa Rosa, in part due to work by leadership organizations such as Los Cien, Hernandez said Sonoma Valley lags behind on such efforts. He said Latinos often lack the confidence or don’t understand how government works or how to get involved.

The two-day training aims at helping them overcome those obstacles, developing leadership skills and boosting their confidence, Hernandez said.

“It takes a little nudging from people who believe in us (Latinos) — like it happened to Sal,” he said.

In addition to Hernandez and Chavez, seven men and nine women who work in accounting, banking, nonprofits and the wine industry will take

part in the training. Among them will be Vanessa Robledo, who left her family's winery and became president of Black Coyote Wines in 2008.

It's not the first leadership training for Robledo, who recently sold her interest in Black Coyote and launched a consulting businesses for wineries that want to market to minorities. She said she previously took part in sessions designed to train future leaders, including one put on by the Sonoma Valley Chamber of Commerce.

"It's important that we stay on top of how we can support our community," said Robledo, who lives in Napa but continues to maintain a strong connection to Sonoma Valley, where her family still runs a winery.

The weekend session is a first for Yuliana Camarena, who grew up in Sonoma Valley and currently serves as the marketing and program assistant at La Luz. As a young Latina who recently graduated from college with a bachelor's degree in business administration, she said she couldn't wait to learn more about how best to prepare herself to become a local leader.

"We (Latinos) are a great portion of this community. If we really want our voices to be heard, it's important we speak out and participate," said Camarena, 23.

Robledo agreed.

"We need to show who we are as people," she said. "We have passion, too. And we want to make this community better."

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