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BUSINESS JOURNAL

COVER STORY

Laredo Chamber of Commerce begins with new home, new leader and new plans



Jorge Vela/Laredo Morning Times

Brizzy San Miguel, Gwen Chandaris, John Woodward, Gabriela Morales, Alexis Larralde, Javi Alonso y Luis Anguiano Lights, Camera, Auction!, event held by the Laredo Chamber of Commerce on Friday, July 8, 2022.

By Jorge A. Vela

LAREDO MORNING TIMES

The Laredo Chamber of Commerce is not just undergoing an office change to a new location after close to four decades being in the same place, but it is also undergoing a change in leadership as there is a new president and CEO.

Just a few months ago, Gabriela Morales — the current president and chief executive officer of the Laredo Chamber of Commerce — took the mantle and has started strong her new administration by being active in events all over the community. She has also tried to make sure that the transition into a new office is something done in a productive manner.

It is a time of major changes for the business organization that has been in existence for over 100 years in the city and had the same president and CEO for close to three decades.

Morales is a major new figure to the scene for the Laredo Chamber of Commerce, as she is only but the second woman to be the president and CEO of the more than 100 years old business organization. Catherine “Cathy” Garcia was the first woman in the role, as she served as president and CEO from June 1991 to June 1992 before Miguel Conchas took over.

“It feels good, it feels that I carry a lot of responsibilities with me and it also feels that it is a great opportunity for new generations to see that good things can happen if you put your mind on it,” Morales said. “Things that get accomplished with the right education, with the right energy, with the right focus. So the sky is the limit as they say, and if you put your mind on it, then it can happen.”

Morales has just arrived the city after working in Washington D.C. for several years. However, she is a Laredo native that never left her city behind.

“I lived here, and I attended Alexander High School and then Texas A&M International University,” she said. “I worked for the City of Laredo for many years and did a lot of promotional work for the City of Laredo, and it was then back in 2003 when I saw the potential for this port. I saw that there was many areas of opportunity to elevate the profile, so I transformed my TAMU credits to Georgetown University and graduated.”

“I got my master’s in business development, and I got to work with an institution that sees programs on a nationwide basis, so I was able to help minority business enterprises export to new markets and sometimes for the first time ever. I saw that it brought a lot of economic development to those areas where I managed the business development sectors, and I saw a lot of benefits such as jobs created, jobs retained, contracts and financing. So all of that to say I knew that my work and skills could benefit my hometown, so that was the turning point when I knew I could put all of my skills to the place that I love, which is Laredo.”

Morales does not just have this experience, but she also was awarded the gold medal by the Secretary of the Commerce in 2020.

Some of the members and other individuals who Morales will work on now during her tenure as president and CEO state that she was a perfect choice and is someone new that they find much inspiration for what she can do during her time.

“Ms. Morales has moved back to our community to help with our important organization, and she has done so with tremendous passion and leadership and she is a bright star that highlights businesses in general in our community and

helps represent all of us through not just our local community but also traveling back to Washington D.C. sometimes as well,” said Mike Marasco, the current chairman of the border of directors of the Laredo Chamber of Commerce.

Some people who continue working with the new leadership of the chamber said they do not forget the decades of work done by Conchas, but they are also thrilled that someone like Morales has taken the mantle to continue working in the chamber.

“We are so thankful for everything that Mr. Conchas has done, because we have become close friends and his family is very wonderful. He has dedicated his life to the Laredo Chamber, and he has done so much service to our community,” said Cliffe Killam, president and CEO of Killam Development. “We are super excited about Gabriela, her leadership and her experiences, as she knows the Laredo community well and she is also someone who has worked a very long time in Washington D.C. in the commerce department.

“She is a really hard worker and really cares about the community. I was very involved in the recruiting and hiring process, and I am just delighted that she is here.”

Rep. Henry Cuellar stated that he believes that she is the best leader right now the chamber could have, as he values these younger people coming to work back in Laredo. He likes the fact that she is reaching out to other industries that have never been attracted by the chamber.

“What I like about what she is doing is that she is looking for new companies, she is looking for the new generations — we need to have the young people who will be the leaders in the future,” Cuellar said.

One woman who also works

in the financial sector states that she is so excited that a woman is now at the top mantle for the chamber, and she believes that this is a great change for the new leadership.

“I think it is a great change. I think that with new people, new beginnings and even a new building comes a new sense of commitment, and I also think that it brings a new sense of unity,” said Imelda Ortiz, a mortgage loan officer. “I think it is wonderful also to have a woman, and goes to show how far we have come in Laredo and how forward-looking we have become with new blood.

“As we look forward, it is becoming more welcoming and more inclusive. When I left Laredo (previously), it was a little bit different as this. With a woman leader, then more women in business would like to come.”

Morales states that her leadership style will focus on a more open door policy style. Also, Morales hopes more people participate in the activities they do with their organization.

“I love listening to feedback, and everybody feels that they are part of the community and everybody feels that they are the chamber,” Morales said. “This is not about a single person but it is rather a whole community. Here we have the committees from Youth Leadership Laredo, where they graduate hundreds of high school students in an annual basis and they go through a very rigorous program. We’ve got Spirit Laredo scholarships for kids to get their college education and apply their skills here back home. We have Cola Blanca, which is a world-renowned hunting contest.”

Some other past chamber members state that it is good to see her as a leader, as her background proves that she knows

how to get things done.

“I think she is doing well. It is a huge challenge for sure, but she has a marvelous background, and she is very educated. I do think that she is the right person and at the right time for the chamber,” LMT Publisher William “Bill” Green said. “She is a planner and a good executioner of plans, and I think she will rally well and work well with Mike Marasco, the volunteers and the chairmen and the board.”

As for whether Morales would like to stay in the position as long as her predecessor in Conchas, she says she is staying flexible with any experiences that may come her way in the future.

“You know what I learned about life throughout the years, that even if you plan to the T, there is always movement around your plans,” Morales said. “My plans might be something, but there is movement all around you and you cannot have a stagnate plan. You cannot have something that is not being able to maneuver, you must be flexible, be able to be open and innovative, and almost born every single day with the mentality of its a new day and with that comes a lot of detachment.”

“Back in D.C., I had a plan, as my plan was to stay with the U.S. Department of Commerce and execute my programs. I called that my baby and continue to develop and get more funding and get more business distribution centers all around the nation. I had great plans when this came around, and if I learned anything from this experience, it is that you have stay nimble. That’s exactly what I am doing every day and thinking that I need to get the job done, with the backbone we have carried for more than 100 years.”

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