

# Laredo Chamber of Commerce looks to the future at its End of the Year Awards Ceremony

By Jorge A. Vela  
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The Laredo Chamber of Commerce recognized some of its most firm volunteers and advocates at the 2022 annual End of the Year Awards Ceremony Tuesday while also introducing their new chairperson for the 2022-23 fiscal year. The event was held at the IBC Bank Annex Ballroom.

The awards included one for outgoing chairman of the Laredo Chamber of Commerce Board Mike Marasco, and awards for 10 other volunteers that helped the organization get to the goal of 700 chamber members in 2022.

“We closed out with wonderful numbers for the chamber, as we increased the membership from 600 to 700 businesses. So at this point, we are encouraging all Laredo-area businesses to be part of the Laredo Chamber of Commerce,” said Gabriela Morales, president and CEO of the Laredo Chamber of Commerce. “The work of these volunteers is extremely important. We could not have done it without them, as we accomplished a lot. We did a lot of ribbon cuttings, award ceremonies, we did a lot of celebrations for anniversaries and ground-breakings, and while people might just say that it is a ribbon cutting, for the Laredo economy to open up a business and choose this city as their prime destination to do business is a big deal.”

Morales states that being a member of the board helps businesses be part of the nonprofit organization that connects them with other like-minded organizations, helps them network and also helps them with business-oriented courses like the business development certification program. This is at no cost to chamber members and helps these businesses with marketing, commerce and other topics.

One of the individuals who got an award during the ceremony was Michael Gonzalez, Laredo College's Senior Director and Resource Development and the education committee chair for the Laredo Chamber of Commerce. He was awarded by the Chamber with the “Spirit of Laredo” Award.

“I am humbled and honored to be selected for the ‘Spirit of Laredo,’ as I think that the spirit of Laredo is in all Laredoans,” Gonzalez said. “It is exhibited in our everyday activities, our support of our different citizens in our community as we all try to bring each other up as a community. I think that it is very important, and that is echoed in our business community.”

“Business leaders also try to bring up small businesses, women-owned businesses, Hispanic-owned businesses. Even though we are 95% Hispanic in this community, we are the beacon in the state of Texas for Hispanic-owned businesses and women-owned businesses, and that is in no small part due to what happens at the Laredo Chamber of Commerce.”

According to Gonzalez, he is astonished at how many Laredoans have a strong entrepreneurial spirit when it comes to starting their own businesses, but he stressed the importance of getting involved in the community in efforts for it to move forward.

“I would challenge Laredoans to think that our largest net export is our talent,” Gonzalez said. “If we harness the talent of our people, we can be even better than what we are to-

day. I would tell you that the way to go about this is to get involved and to just take that first step and get involved in anything that you may be interested in. Put your input and effort behind it and then great things are going to happen.”

Some of the other individuals or organizations awarded by the Chamber included KGNS with the Jim Parish Media Award, the Lamar Advertising Company with the Jim Parish Media Award, Jorge Leal with the “Un Poquito Mas” Award, Imelda Rodriguez with the “Un Poquito Mas” Award, A. B. Barrera with the Chairman Appointee of the Year Award, Gloria Solis with the Chairman Appointee of the Year Award, Elmo Daniel Lopez with the Volunteer of the Year Award, Adrian Zapata with the Board Member of the Year Award and Rosa Cruz with the Chairman's Challenge Award.

Barrera, the council chair for the Laredo Chamber of Commerce Executive Committee, also showed his appreciation for the honor bestowed to him by the Chamber.

“I am honored to have been awarded the Chairman Appointee of the Year Award,” Barrera said. “As a Chamber volunteer for over 25 years, I’ve had the opportunity to meet and collaborate with many business leaders and like-minded business owners throughout the community. The Chamber has provided us excellent resources and opportunities for us to work together and help craft a successful business model. I’m proud to have been a part of shaping business and commerce for our members.”

During the event, Marasco also officially passed the gavel of chairman of the board to the new chairman for the 2022-23 fiscal year, Gabriel Castillo. The new chairman stated that he is elated for his new position in the Chamber and also ready to work.

“I am very excited to start a new year and new tenure as chairman of the board, and I have a lot of plans for Laredo and the Laredo Chamber of Commerce, how we plan to move forward, some initiatives and how we can deal with some of the changes in our economy,” Castillo said. “Initiatives to work better and make this a better city for everyone.”

Castillo states that he has been on both sides of the aisle as a business owner and also as a member of the board, which he says makes him feel qualified for the job. He is also grateful that Marasco told him years ago that they would one day be chairpersons due to tenure, and that they had been preparing ever since for such an important role.

Morales states that Marasco was instrumental to their apparatus during the 2021-22 fiscal year for everything they did.

“He was great at helping us out, as this was a very big year for the chamber,” Castillo said. “We moved locations ... and he was instrumental to making that decision of the best property for the Chamber and the most centralized location. We really appreciate his involvement and dedication and devotion to not only the Chamber of Commerce but also the community as a whole, the economy of Laredo and the economy of South Texas.”

During his first official

speech as chairman, Castillo said that he hopes the Chamber gets from 700 members to 1,000 under his tenure, and Morales stated that this is something that is very achievable.

“It will be accomplished, because we know that the call of action to improve our city is out there. The business community knows about us, and they know that if they were to join, they would contribute to the greater good and more employment and opportunities,” Morales said. “I know that it is very doable, and I am very confident and with all the help of the volunteers here and around the room, I know that we will be able to accomplish that.”

As the awards ceremony brought an end to the fiscal year for the Chamber, Morales said he looks forward to what is to come this next fiscal year and al-

so hopes that next year's presentation is even bigger and better, with more volunteers and businesses taking part with the Chamber.

“Next time around, hopefully we have many new volunteers that have yet not participated with us, and hopefully we give them the awards,” Morales said.

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Jorge A. Vela/Laredo Morning Times  
**Castillo speaks at the End of the Year Awards Ceremony at the IBC Bank Annex Ballroom.**



Jorge A. Vela/Laredo Morning Times  
**Castillo and members from IBC Bank are recognized at the End of the Year Awards Ceremony.**

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