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Laredo Morning Times

SUNDAY, JANUARY 10, 2010

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INSIDE, PAGE 2A

SORRY SENATOR

MAJORITY LEADER REGRETS OBAMA RACE REMARKS

IN ART OF LIVING

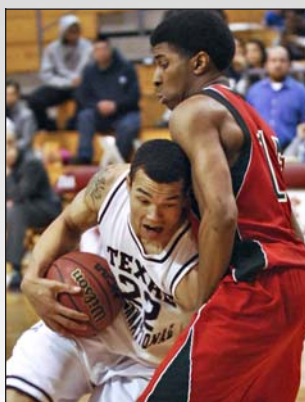
BEATING THE ODDS



AUTHOR HOPES TO MAKE LATINA ROLE MODELS MORE VISIBLE WITH BOOK

IN SPORTS

TAMIU HOOPS



DUSTDEVILS BEAT TOP HEARTLAND CONFERENCE TEAM

IN FOCUS

AN ARTIST AT HEART



RETIRED MAN DILIGENTLY CREATES PIGGY BANKS

INSIDE

OBITS 15A OPINION 2-3D
 SCORES 2B TV LISTINGS 5-6D
 WEATHER 6B SALUD F
 ART OF LIVING C

TODAY'S FORECAST



HIGH 56° | LOW 27°



128th Year, No. 201, 159 pages

PUBLIC EDUCATION

LISD: THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE UGLY

By NICK GEORGIU
 LAREDO MORNING TIMES

LISD REPORT CARD	2009-2010 SCHOOL YEAR		
ISSUES & EVALUATIONS	GOOD	POOR	AT RISK
STUDENTS WITH POTENTIAL	X		
HOMOGENOUS DEMOGRAPHIC	X		
ENGAGED COMMUNITY	X		
FUNDING BALANCE	X		
ACADEMICS		X	
LANGUAGE ACQUISITION		X	
PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT		X	
EMPLOYEE ACCOUNTABILITY		X	
LOW EXPECTATIONS		X	
PREPAREDNESS FOR TEACHER QUALITY			X
APATHY			X
SHORTAGE OF TEACHERS AND FUNDING			X

LISD has been described by its former and current leaders as a district where a problem is found under every rock that's turned over.

From academics, security and safety issues to maintenance and employee accountability, Superintendent A. Marcus Nelson and his cabinet said they will continue to hammer away at the many issues facing a district one trustee described as being "on fire."

"I will not leave any stone unturned because I'm not afraid of what's underneath that rock," Nelson said in late December. "I believe in accountability for all."

This semester, increasing standardized test scores, the bilingual program, and security and safety top the to-do-list for Nelson and the Laredo Independent School District Board of Trustees. Another issue is health and wellness.

"It's going to be a challenge," said Nelson, jokingly noting the \$42,000 Blue

See LISD | PAGE 16A

CHARITY



Photo by Ulysses S. Romero | Laredo Morning Times

Gustavo Gonzalez slowly goes down the steps outside the South Texas Food Bank after receiving two boxes of food Saturday morning.

FOR ELDERLY, A BAG OF HELP ON COLD MORNING

By CÉSAR G. RODRIGUEZ
 LAREDO MORNING TIMES

Hundreds of elderly citizens bundled up in gloves, jackets, beanies and sweaters — and some with a double set of socks — to protect themselves from the cold weather Saturday morning.

Dressed up in many layers as possible, they walked inside the South Texas Food Bank to pick up their monthly bag of groceries.

About 500 elderly people picked up the bags as part of Community Supplemental Food Program, where people older than 60 and children not on the WIC program receive a bag of food.

Also inside the STFB, a group of volunteers from Friends Health Care wanted to give back to the people.

On their table, they had cookies and coffee.

Roxanne Reyna, a registered

nurse, said volunteers were on board checking people's blood pressure and glucose levels.

"We do volunteer work as part of our community hours to help assess the needs of the community," Reyna said.

She added that concerns in the community are diabetes and hypertension.

"We're checking on that," she said.

Mario Esparza, 79, arrived af-

See HELP | PAGE 16A

LABOR

Mexicans suffer in economic recession

Migrant workers, dirt farmers fare poorly

By DUDLEY ALTHAUS
 HOUSTON CHRONICLE

LA FLORIDA, Mexico — Not so long ago, grateful villagers who fled to jobs across the United States erected a monument to the dollar bill in this community of dirt farmers staked to the barren highlands of central Mexico.

Today, amid the worst hard times in even great-grandparents' memories, many of those same migrants have returned home for good to the hunger they'd hoped to escape.

And the metal dollar monument stands rusting at the entrance to a small horse track carved into the cornfields, a fading memorial to dreams postponed or abandoned.

"Those who come back will have nothing," said Gloria Ramirez, 36, who was helping relatives a few weeks ago hand-harvest a patch of scraggly corn in the shadow of the sign. "There just isn't anything here."

Few of Mexico's poorer cor-

See MEXICO | PAGE 14A

Aiming High

Author shoots to make Latina role models visible in new book

By KIRSTEN CROW
LAREDO MORNING TIMES

Laura Contreras-Rowe beat the odds — at least according to statistics. Faced with financial hardship and bearing a great deal of responsibility from a young age, Contreras-Rowe found herself “through the looking glass,” embodying a story not unlike Horatio Alger as she reaped success as an adult. It wasn’t easy, she said. She had to work hard to gain her footing and climb in pursuit of her success. But once she found her inspiration, there was no deterrent.

Contreras-Rowe knows, though, that many young Hispanic girls struggle to find their own motivation.

“The (statistics) aren’t very good for Hispanic girls,” she said, citing figures that rank Hispanic women and girls as having the highest attempted suicide rate, pregnancy rate and high school dropout rate, all while being at increased risk for gang, alcohol and drug activity.

But instead of shaking her head and mourning the stats, Contreras-Rowe felt motivated to take action.

Troubled by a lack of adequate role models for girls outside the family, the first-time author dove deep into research to find successful Hispanic women to feature in her coffee-table book, “Aim High: Extraordinary Stories of Hispanic and Latina Women,” in order to make those women “more visible.”

“I’m now a successful realtor and entrepreneur — and I wanted to make a difference,” she said. “A couple of people told me to write my story — about Laredo, about where I came from. (And I thought), ‘I bet there’s more women like me out there.’”

She did. Among the women featured in the story are Rebecca Gomez Diamond, a Fox Business

Network anchor; Anna Escobedo Cabral, former U.S. treasurer; Laura Lopez Cano, an award-winning artist; celebrity chef Laura “Chef Lala” Diaz; Anjelah Johnson, comedian and actor; and Erica Ann Ortiz, drag racer.

There are women of more modest recognition, but formidable ambition: a basketball coach from inner-city L.A., a psychologist, a project manager for NASA, a U.S. Navy commander.

And among the many who grace the pages, five are from Laredo, including flamenco legend and dance teacher, Cristina Godines Greco — the first to agree to participate in the ambitious project — while the “legacy” page features the Ramirez women, including Minerva Ramirez, former principal of Zachary Elementary and owner of Carmin’s Flower Shop; Dr. Carmen Ramirez-Rathmell, dentist; and Minita Ramirez, Ph.D., dean of Texas A&M International University.

“Aim High” is intended to bear messages of faith, hope and love, Contreras-Rowe said, and “inspire you to see beyond your current circumstances and see that you can triumph over any situation in your life.”

“I will never say that it is go-

See AUTHOR | PAGE 5C



Laura Contreras-Rowe

Patience is a virtue when planning for the future

I recently had the opportunity to visit Austin for a long weekend — and while I’ve traveled to the capital city several times in the past few years, this was one of those trips where I had a chance to spend some time enjoying the sites.

It was a bittersweet experience reminiscing about my college days in the ’80s. At the time, my sister and I ran a retail store on Sixth Street, which turned out to be quite an adventure.

Back then, most of Austin was still feeling the economic pains of the late ’70s.



Austinites never gave up, though. Weekly and monthly meetings were held throughout the city to discuss solutions for the future. A master plan, which included a convention center and downtown revitalization, seemed like only a dream.

Twenty years later, I find that dream became a reality. A vibrant downtown

with condos nestled above retail spaces, filled with boutiques, restaurants, spas and bookstores, now make up most of the landscape.

Austin friends tell me there are still issues that need to be addressed, but for the most part, the community followed through with its commitment.

Laredo is now embarking on a master plan of its own.

Despite the naysayers, there is a possibility for great things to come if we learn to work together, one day at a time. Meetings will

be taking place to discuss the future of the master plan, and it’s expected the “average Joe” citizens will be heard.

This process will take time and perseverance, but I believe it can be another dream that can become a reality.

We all need to make a commitment for the long haul. Patience will be vital to make this master plan a reality.

Dentists host debs

Local dentists Dr. Joe

Castellano and Dr. Vanessa Carpenter Castellano brought bright smiles to their guests over the holidays when they opened their beautiful home in Regency Park for a Society of Martha Washington debutante party, which also honored this year’s George and Martha Washington, John and Anna Galo.

Assisting with hosting duties were Karen and David Hopson, Angela and Fred Hopson, Debbie and Barry Gilpin, Tracy and Todd Williams, Lety and Mico Garcia, and Arturo Alexander.

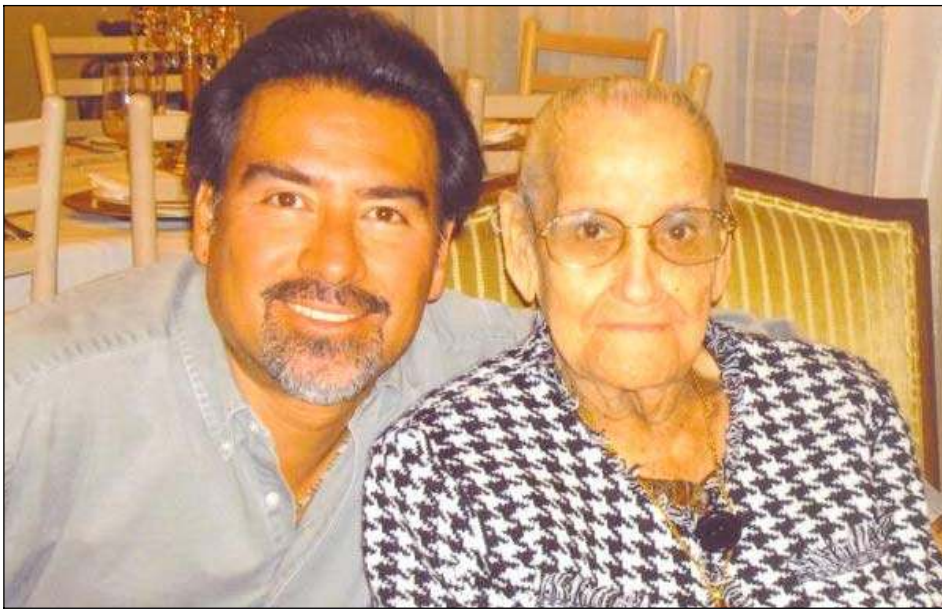
The Castellanos’ home was elegantly adorned in the Christmas spirit, providing warm surroundings for loads of camaraderie.

Big birthday

Celebrating a benchmark birthday, Ramon Salido received warm wishes from many family members and friends who descended upon Tokyo Garden restaurant for a festive evening.

Liling Huang, owner of

See CASTILLO | PAGE 6C



Courtesy photos

Jose Luis "Boni" Benavides Lopez shares the holiday spirit with his grandmother, Teresa Martinez Lopez, who recently celebrated her 92nd birthday.



Gathering after the baptism of baby Mauricio Esteban Gomez are, left to right, godmother Judi Cruz, parents Miguel and Melissa Gomez, and Marco Heras, godfather.



The St. Augustine advisory board hosted a Christmas gathering for faculty and staff including, standing, left to right, Vidal Cantu, Mercurio Martinez, Fred Santos, Sabas Zapata, Bishop James Tamayo and Jesus Romero. Seated, left to right, are Olga P. Gentry and Sylvia Cortez.

Surfing the City II

By Gabriel Castillo



Tricia Cortez and Alex Iadapolo are all smiles at a recent gathering.



Sonya Sanchez and Robert Lopez take time out for the camera after exchanging wedding vows.

AUTHOR | Continued from Page 1C

ing to be easy," she wrote in her forward. "But I will say that with tenacity and a positive attitude, you, too, can aim high and overcome."

Growing up

Born to Olga Ramirez Brunken and George Contreras, both originally of Laredo, Contreras-Rowe spent her early childhood in Dallas, where Hispanics remained a minority in the '60s and '70s, she said.

"My parents would not speak Spanish to us because we were discriminated against so badly," Contreras-Rowe said. "I regret the decision they made, but I understand why they did it."

Following the divorce of her parents, Contreras-Rowe returned with her mother and sister to Laredo due to financial struggles. The hardships didn't end upon arrival. The family was evicted from four or five homes before finally finding a permanent residence in a trailer parked in her mother's parents backyard.

Both Contreras-Rowe and her sister, Cordy, were fending for themselves at a young age. Contreras-Rowe's mother was a full-time nurse working long hours at Baylor Hospital, leaving the girls often unsupervised in the evenings, and making them responsible for getting to school in the mornings.

By the time Contreras-Rowe was in middle school, she had already begun experimenting with cigarette smoking and drugs.

But two circumstances altered the path she had embarked on.

One inspiration was her cousin from New York,

who visited Laredo in the summers and cast a light on other lifestyles, big cities and big dreams for Contreras-Rowe.

"I wanted to be like them one day — rock stars who came into town every summer," she said.

At the same time, she, like many of the women in her book, found salvation in sports as she pursued golf and swimming, discovering a competitive nature within that she didn't know she had. It endowed her focus and drive, while deterring her from some of the poorer choices available.

Seeking success

After graduating from Nixon High School as a member of the Class of 1984, Contreras-Rowe first attended community college before her father invited her to take a job at a factory in Garland. Her employment there, though, didn't last long — she nearly lost her hand in a conveyor-belt accident, resulting in 50 stitches and a return to Laredo.

Back in the Gateway City, though, something clicked: If she wanted out, she would need to get an education.

By 1986, Contreras-Rowe was enrolled in Oral Roberts University, located in Tulsa, Okla., where she graduated with a bachelor's degree in broadcast design and telecommunications in 1990. Shortly after, she moved to Virginia Beach, Va., where she still resides, to continue her education. That was where she met her husband, Keith, who she wed in 1993, and had two children with: Joshua and Austin.

By 2000, Contreras-Rowe

found herself interested in becoming a realtor to earn extra money for vacations. She discovered that she had a real knack for the business, and her competitive nature made her a natural.

"I had lived in a trailer my whole childhood and now I was selling the American dream!" she wrote.

The book

It all started with the statistics, she said.

Disturbed by the numbers that prominently featured Hispanic girls at high risk for destructive behavior, she decided to take action, first by founding the "Why Be Average?" organization, and then, at the prompting of friends and family, she began writing her own story. But as she told her tale, she wondered how many other women out there had similar stories.

"It spun into so many things," she said.

Soon, the book took on a life of its own. Contreras-Rowe cut back her hours as a realtor to focus on it, investing countless hours of research, interviews and traveling the country to meet her subjects in person.

"When I started the book, I didn't tell (my subjects) what I was doing," she confessed. "But these women trusted me. And that's one of the coolest things, I think... there is this unique sisterhood, a bond."

Unable to sell the book to a publisher, Contreras-Rowe decided to take matters into her own hands and self-published it. Before reaching the actual production process, though,

she ensured the "look" of it, as well as the editing and writing, were of a professional caliber.

Each of the 33 stories is accompanied by a feature photo of its teller, while the story itself is told in first-person, as written by Contreras-Rowe. Many detail difficult backgrounds, overcome by sheer will power: Contreras-Rowe's is the last told in the book.

The campaign

Getting "Aim High" published was just one piece of the puzzle, Contreras-Rowe said. The arguably tougher challenge is getting it into the hands of the youth it

targets.

She is currently searching for sponsors to help fund a campaign to donate 50,000 of the books to underprivileged schoolchildren.

In the process, she went on a book tour throughout Texas in December — including stops in Austin, San Antonio and Laredo — and was featured on the Fox Business Network. The interview is posted on Contreras-Rowe's Web site, www.aimhighbook.com.

The book is scheduled to be available locally at the Texas A&M International University bookstore, and possibly as soon as Monday.

Now, Contreras-Rowe is pursuing several follow-up

books to act as a series to the first, including one "Aim High: Extraordinary Stories Hispanic and Latino men," as well as a faith-based work.

During an interview in December, the author winked when she said she'd been interviewing subjects that very weekend for the upcoming projects, but declined to specify who the possible subjects may be.

"I believe God has a purpose, and the purpose is to offer hope and inspiration to this generation of kids," she said. "I'm excited."

(Kirsten Crow may be reached at 728-2543 or by e-mail at kirsten@lmtonline.com)

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