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Sunday February 12, 2006

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**CHIEFTAIN PHOTO/ERIN SMITH**

**Otto Espinoza, mentor program director (left), stands with Mark Parrish, who was named mentor of the year for the Dr. Michael P. Espinoza Challenge for Success Program.**

## Dream of mentor program realized in SLV

**By ERIN SMITH  
THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN**

**LA JARA** - When well-known San Luis Valley dentist Michael Espinoza of Manassa was killed in a car accident in 1998, his dream of a mentoring program at his alma mater did not die with him.

Sorrow clouds the eyes of his brother, Ricardo Espinoza, when the former director of the Conejos County Department of Social Service recalls the community's loss.

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More than 2,000 people attended the popular dentist and North Conejos school board member's funeral services at the middle school gymnasium three days later. Then-Colorado Attorney General Ken Salazar, now a U.S. senator, delivered the eulogy for his boyhood friend, citing Espinoza's success and noting his friend's varied interests, from ranching to orthodontia.

"Three or four months after my brother died, I decided there should be a mentoring program. It originally was Michael's program. The seed was planted and it took root," Ricardo Espinoza recalled recently at a dinner in Alamosa honoring mentors in the Dr. Michael P. Espinoza Challenge for Success Program. January was National Mentoring Month and it was celebrated in the San Luis Valley in a big way.

The program was born in early 1999 and is believed to be the only rural program for high-school students in the nation, Espinoza said. His nephew, Otto J. Espinoza, who directs the program, agreed.

"There is no other high-school program in a rural area in the U.S. because people don't think (mentoring) can work after middle school, that kids are too set on their path. Our program is adapted to high-school kids and has an added component: job training. I don't think this kind of program would work anywhere else, but it works here in an area with no resources, where everybody is really spread out and we do really tough things. We take time; we take a chance," Otto Espinoza said.

The program came together with the help of many in the community, including the dentist's old friend, Salazar. Salazar's brothers, Leroy and John, a U.S. representative, have been involved with the program. John Salazar and his wife, Mary Lou, have been program mentors.

The program pairs mentors with kids. Mentor backgrounds are checked out thoroughly - including a CBI check which involves fingerprinting - their homes visited and references required before they are paired with youth. Adults and youth of the same gender are paired, but sometimes a woman mentor is paired with a male, Clarissa Woodworth, program board member, explained.

The mentors also go through a training program.

Mentors aren't meant to take the place of parents or teachers, although many of them are teachers. Currently there are 18 volunteer mentors, some of whom serve on the advisory board.

The nonprofit is funded through Conejos County Department

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of Social Services with money for its \$45,000-a-year budget, up from \$38,000 last year, from a number of sources including Rocky Mountain SER.

Initially the program was contracted through San Luis Valley Comprehensive Community Mental Health Center. Now, while it is connected to the mental health center, it runs through and with the support of Centauri High School and the North Conejos School District.

Mentors are volunteers, but have certain requirements of them. They meet with their subjects three times a month with one of those times being a face-to-face session. The other two sessions can be through telephone calls or e-mail.

This year's mentor of the year, Centauri teacher-coach Mark Parrish of Alamosa, was cited by the two students he mentors: one who said he was a father figure, the other saying he was like a big brother.

Parrish has been a teacher here for three years. Receiving his award, he credited his wife, Stephanie Martinez Parrish, a longtime educator, for his inspiration. "I love these kids," he said, his voice choked with emotion.

There is a monthly case management sessions for volunteers and quarterly activities, like bowling and movies, for the kids.

"Most laymen think mentoring is 'buddying up' with kids. There is more to it than meets the eye," Ricardo Espinoza insists.

When Ken Salazar was attorney general, he pushed for career exploration and job shadowing for youth. Both are elements of the Challenge for Success Program here. At the end of each school year, kids are taken to Denver for a week to explore colleges and careers. Often it is the first urban experience for many.

There are no ethnic and socioeconomic requirements for the youths in the program, which costs the youths nothing, says Otto Espinoza, adding that as a result there is no stigma.

There have been an estimated 125 participants in the program since its inception. On graduation, participants are guaranteed a \$500 college scholarship.

Participants are determined based upon their potential of success in such an experience. Helping pick the youth is Centauri counselor Celina Espinoza, Michael Espinoza's widow, advisory board member and herself a mentor.

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