

## DESIRE TO HELP RUNS DEEP

By Roy Ortega



When I look back at my 35 years as an observer of local events, I cannot think of many organizations in El Paso that have truly devoted themselves to *directly* helping people lift themselves from the crippling effects of poverty. By the time I accepted the position of Community Relations Manager at Project BRAVO in the spring of 2010, my altruistic spirit had been shaken many times by the realities of the world. It has never been hard for me to distinguish between an institution dedicated to building a strong community through investment in human capital – and one that was intent on stripping what it could from it for purely self-serving reasons. As a journalist, I often wrote about organizations whose leaders shamelessly padded their own pockets at the expense of people in need. But over the years, I could always point to Project BRAVO as a shining example of an organization that is *honestly* dedicated to helping people. As a member of the management team at Project BRAVO, I deeply appreciate my fellow workers who are motivated *first and foremost* by a genuine desire to help their fellow citizens.

*Note: Executive Director Laura Ponce's column will return next month.*



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# The BRAVO Newsletter

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## HUD Grant Supports PB Housing Efforts

Project BRAVO has been awarded a share of a U.S. Housing and Urban Development grant to help communities address a variety of housing and mortgage issues. The HUD grant, in the amount of \$37,458.12, will help qualified El Paso County residents avoid foreclosure and assist potential homeowners obtain pre-purchase counseling and education. The recent home mortgage crisis across the U.S. has impacted lower-income residents at a proportionately higher rate than other groups, according to a recent Pew Research study. The study points out that Hispanic and African-American home-



buyers are more likely to secure home loans in the sub-prime market where loans are higher-priced. The result, unfortunately, is a higher debt level for a population that struggles to hold on to homes during times of economic distress.

In addition to concerns about high mortgage rates and limited access to capital, minorities are considered vulnerable to predatory practices. Part of the latest funding will be used to educate Project BRAVO clients regarding potential scams. Homeowners facing foreclosure are often offered help by unscrupulous operators who promise to fend off banks in exchange for large fees, sometimes in the hundreds of dollars. "It is fairly common among our clients because they find themselves desperate to keep their homes," said Project BRAVO Housing Counselor **Ignacio Segura**. Project BRAVO has become one of the leading HUD-certified counseling agencies in the Southwestern United States providing services to mostly low-income, elderly and disabled residents in El Paso County. Staff members include Housing Manager **Apolonio Montejano**, Senior Counselor **Pete Huerta**, Counselor **Ignacio Segura**, and Housing Assistants **Jose Miguel Israel** and **Jessie Vasquez**.



## History of Community Action

Throughout America's history, the practice of helping others has been a key part of the nation's development. During the early part of the 20th Century, rampant poverty, health problems, racial segregation and education issues were seen as barriers to achieving the ideals of a great nation. Economic distress during the 1930's gave rise to government efforts to combat a multitude of social problems that prevented the nation from moving forward. In the late 1950s, many community groups in places like New York City and Phila-

delphia began organizing programs aimed specifically at coping with issues of crime and poverty. The concept became known as "Community Action" because it stemmed from within neighborhoods who saw a need to solve their own problems. The idea was adopted by President John F. Kennedy and became one of the cornerstones of his "New Frontier". Following Kennedy's assassination, President Lyndon B. Johnson pushed forward with community action and (continued)



VALENTINE'S DAY



**Helping People,  
Changing Lives**



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the "War on Poverty" began in earnest. In 1964, the U.S. Congress accepted and adopted efforts to battle racial segregation and eliminate poverty once and for all. Civil Rights legislation became the law of the land, despite resistance from some corners of society. Congress began the process of appropriating millions of dollars to fight the war on poverty. However, getting the money to the grassroots levels where it could be used effectively proved to be a major challenge. The result was the formation of dozens of non-profit community-based groups known as Community Action Agencies (CAAs). Thus, Project BRAVO was born. Under the auspices of the El Paso County Commission, the newly-formed agency quickly began its efforts to address serious education concerns. The Head Start Program was among the first programs administered under Project BRAVO. Since its humble beginnings, Project BRAVO has been a part of countless other community-based programs aimed at ending poverty and helping low-income, elderly and disabled residents overcome obstacles to self-sufficiency. Over the years, the agency has spearheaded efforts to provide affordable housing to low-income residents, generate employment, expand possibilities for education through its Adult Basic Education and GED programs, and improve community health through its various health-related activities. The agency's long and colorful history is rooted in its long-held value system described succinctly in its slogan - *Helping People, Changing Lives.*



*"Let us think of education as a means of developing our greatest abilities because in each one of us is a private hope and dream, which fulfilled, can be translated into a benefit for everyone and a greater strength for our nation."*

*-John F. Kennedy*

## A Tribute to Sargent Shriver



Sargent Shriver visited El Paso in 1966 where he lauded efforts by Project BRAVO to "move persons out of poverty." Standing just beyond Shriver is Jesus "Chuy" Terrazas, Project BRAVO's Co-Director who later became an El Paso city council member. - *Photo from the archives of the El Paso Herald-Post*

*"If education does not create a need for the best in life, then we are stuck in an undemocratic, rigid caste society." - Sargent Shriver*



**Sargent Shriver** was best known as the father of the Peace Corps. But his death last week at the age of 95 reminded the staff and management at Project BRAVO that he was also the intellectual and legislative force behind the development of Community Action Programs across the country. Without Shriver, Project BRAVO simply would not exist. In February of 1964, **President Lyndon B. Johnson** tapped Shriver to head the task force that drafted the initial legislation aimed at ending poverty in the U.S. Later that same year, Congress passed the Economic Opportunity Act as part of a series of civil rights and anti-poverty measures to ensure equal access to economic opportunities for all Americans. President Johnson appointed Shriver as the director of the newly-formed Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO). Project BRAVO was formed during the same period as an agency dedicated to removing obstacles for low-income residents of El Paso County. During a visit to El Paso in 1966, Shriver met with Project BRAVO Co-Director **Jesus "Chuy" Terrazas** and lauded the agency's efforts to "move persons out of poverty." Despite its noble goals, the War on Poverty was not without its detractors. Shriver's visit to El Paso in 1966 was dominated by efforts from Republicans to strip the OEO of all its power. Under one GOP proposal, the OEO would have been placed under various other federal agencies which, in effect, would have diluted its effectiveness. However, Shriver fought back and ultimately convinced President Johnson and a majority of Congress to move forward with the program. Since then, millions of Americans have been lifted out of poverty, a strong testament to a man who dedicated his life to ensuring equal rights and equal opportunities for all citizens of a great nation.

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# New Project BRAVO Board of Directors Seated

Five new members of the Project BRAVO Board of Directors took their seats alongside their colleagues during the first full meeting of 2011. The official swearing-in of the entire board took place at the Radisson Hotel on Tuesday, January 25 with friends and family members in attendance. Members of the board of directors are tasked with ensuring proper governance for Project BRAVO's administration. The new board takes on the formidable task of guiding El Paso's Community Action Agency through some difficult chal-

lenges in the new year including the potential for lower funding levels from various government sources. At the state level, Texas lawmakers are grappling with an overall budget shortfall estimated as high as \$30 billion. Although the exact targets of state reductions have yet to be identified, education and social services are generally regarded to be high on the list of possible cutbacks, according to sources in Austin. Project BRAVO board members will also be keeping close tabs on the efficiencies of administering the millions of dollars appropriated by the

U.S. Congress for the Weatherization Assistance Program (WAP). Despite the concerns over potential funding reductions, board members continue to strike an optimistic beat. Throughout its 46-year history, Project BRAVO has faced reductions in funding levels several times. Board members point out that each time, the agency has weathered the storm and to this day continues to fulfill its obligation to the community by providing needed services including employment, adult education, energy assistance, energy conservation, housing and referral services.

## 2011 Project BRAVO Board Swearing-In Ceremony



### 2011 Project BRAVO Board

- Dr. Maria Arias - Chair, Private Sector
- Robert Carrillo - Co-Chair, Private Sector
- Sam Diaz - Treasurer, Private Sector
- Dori Evans - Secretary, Private Sector
- Vacant - Private Sector
- Guillermo "Memo" Acosta - Public Sector
- Erasmo Andrade - Public Sector
- Carl Robinson - Public Sector
- Russell Booth - Public Sector
- Vacant - Public Sector
- Enedina "Nina" Serna - Lower Valley
- Arturo Moreno Jr. - Central/South El Paso
- Mago Arellano - West Side/Upper Valley
- Felix Valenzuela - Northeast El Paso
- Maria Pilar Tovar - East El Paso