

## Early Poverty Fight Hindered by Cultural Insensitivity

By Roy Ortega

*"Forming a bridge of communication and understanding to a family who speak no English, distrust strangers, and have little desire to help themselves is not an easy matter." - The El Paso Herald Post, May 15, 1967.*

The opening paragraph of a newspaper story on Project BRAVO in 1967 spoke volumes about the attitudes that prevailed during one of the most interesting eras of our time. The War on Poverty was still in its infancy. A noble idealism combined with a practical concern over the social and economic well-being of the land was the motivation that drove our government to help the poor. Congress was pouring millions of dollars into communities across the country to help lift an impoverished population from the depths of misery. The approach, accepted then as it is now, was simply to improve the lives of the poor by providing education and job training. But the obvious lack of cultural understanding along the U.S.- Mexico border made an otherwise simple goal harder to achieve. The unique circumstances that existed among Mexican-American families were at first not fully understood by the government. Project BRAVO, the agency designated to lead the poverty fight in El Paso, found itself facing some formidable challenges that ultimately threatened to derail its entire effort.

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# The BRAVO Newsletter

VOLUME 2, ISSUE 5

MAY, 2011

## PB Board Places Strong Focus on Weatherization

When **President Obama** took office in 2009, he quickly pursued his promise to help the nation reduce its energy consumption by weatherizing the homes of millions of low-income residents. Among his top priorities before Congress was legislation to enact the Weatherization Assistance Program (WAP) under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). Project BRAVO was among the first community action agencies to apply for and receive millions of dollars for the weatherization of hundreds of homes in El Paso County. The agency received nearly \$9 million in stimulus funding to help accomplish the president's goals. "Since the new weatherization program was implemented in January 2010, Project BRAVO has weatherized 893 homes in El Paso County," said **Maggie Rodriguez**, Project BRAVO's WAP/ARRA Supervisor.



Project BRAVO board members tour the home of an elderly client who received weatherization services under the agency's multi-million dollar program.

Members of the Project BRAVO Board of Directors have been instrumental in guiding the agency through the oftentimes difficult challenges of implementing the program. Since 2010, board members have been dedicated to ensuring agency clients receive a full range of weatherization services including the installation of weather stripping, attic insulation and in many cases, new energy-efficient heating and cooling appliances.

## The Future of Policy-Making in Good Hands

While budget battles rage in Washington D.C. and the future of the country is debated by Congressional leaders, El Paso student **Nicole Martinez** is firmly focused on her own future and the role it will play in helping steer the country in a positive direction. Martinez, a 23-year old psychology student at the University of Texas at El Paso, is among several students participating in the Congressional Hispanic Institute Internship Program. Nicole's strength and determination can be traced to someone who is quite familiar to everyone at Project BRAVO - her father. **Mike Martinez** heads the agency's Weatherization Assistance Program. His daughter's impres-

sive upward trajectory is a source of immense pride and joy for the entire Martinez family. Nicole herself credits her family for inspiring her to succeed. "I am doing well because my family is my support and they're very proud of the things I have achieved," she told El Diario de El Paso newspaper.



Nicole Martinez is shown here with Congressman Silvestre Reyes, D-El Paso.



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First and foremost was the language barrier. Most Project BRAVO clients at the time lacked even the most basic grasp of the English language. Some in fact, were barely literate in either English or Spanish, forcing the government to expend additional money on ESL programs all along the border. The Herald Post article painted a picture of a border culture that was impossibly irredeemable. "In most cases, the husbands have gone off in search of work and never return," was a quote attributed to a Project BRAVO staff member. The article included a profile of a local family in which a parallel to Steinbeck's "Grapes of Wrath" was drawn to describe the abhorrent conditions. "Mr. G drinks, has a severe speech impediment and cannot hold a steady job, spends most of his time with other women," wrote the reporter, citing "facts" from Project BRAVO records. The family home was described as "filthy and littered, and the house is crawling with cockroaches." Newspaper accounts like this inevitably led to questions about the validity of government programs aimed at wiping out poverty. In the eyes of detractors, efforts to help the poor were a waste of taxpayer dollars, especially when used to help Mexican-American families whose plight they believed was beyond resolve. A year later, Project BRAVO predictably came under fire from government regulators who raised suspicions over the way the agency was using government funding to help the poor. Fortunately, Project BRAVO prevailed and the War on Poverty continues in earnest to this day. The historical record, however, clearly reveals that the cultural insensitivities of the time more often than not stood as a hindrance to anti-poverty efforts along the border. The Herald-Post account is also affirmation that fighting poverty historically has been one of the most difficult of all human challenges but one that must never be abandoned.



*"El corazón de una madre siempre está con sus hijos."*  
- Un proverbio



*"God could not be everywhere and therefore he made mothers."* - Jewish Proverb



*"A pope, a bishop and a saint."* - Sonny Melendrez, whose mom, above, is a Project BRAVO client.



## Paint-a-thon Preps Underway

The 25th Annual Paint-a-thon won't take place until mid-September, but planning for the county-wide event has already begun in earnest. Last year, the event succeeded in painting the homes of 42 elderly and disabled residents of El Paso County with the help and support from dozens of community volunteer groups and individuals. Local businesses pitched in with donations of thousands of

dollars worth of paint and supplies. Organizers are hoping for a larger turnout this year. Applications from residents who need their homes beautified will be accepted by the beginning of summer. More details to come. For information, call 915-562-4100.



## ¿Que ondas?

**Birthdays** Housing Manager **Apolonio Montejano** celebrated his \_\_\_ (fill in the blank) birthday on April 13.



**Welcome Aboard** **Brenda Rodriguez** joins the Project BRAVO staff as Weatherization Service Representative II. She'll be assigned to the Weatherization office in East El Paso.

## ABE/E Reaches Out



Project BRAVO has stepped up its efforts to assist residents seeking employment in the El Paso County area, according to Adult Basic Education/Employment Manager **Angel Vargas**. Figures from the Texas Work Force Commission show El Paso's unemployment rate remains at 10-percent. There is some positive news, however. The Work force Commission reported earlier this year that since January 2009, El Paso has gained 5,600 jobs. Project BRAVO is responding to the need by providing employment and adult basic education services to local residents. Project BRAVO continues to work collaboratively with numerous local businesses and industries to place unemployed or underemployed workers in various job positions throughout the El Paso County.