

the Watch – Telluride & Mountain Village, Ouray County

New Superintendent Settling Into New Job, Looks to Future

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by Gus Jarvis

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RIDGWAY – With the start of the school year fast approaching, Ridgway Schools Superintendent Cheryl Gomez is easing into her new post with open ears and a focus on future growth and the possibilities that are abound for the school district.

Gomez was recently hired by the Ridgway School Board to fill outgoing superintendent Douglass Bissonette’s position after he tendered his resignation in November of last year. Gomez has been on the job for a little over two weeks in her new digs at the Ridgway Elementary School, asking a lot of questions and collecting as much information as possible about the school district.

“Right now, I am a sponge absorbing everything in,” Gomez said, “I am asking a lot of questions. It’s not that I am upset with anything, I just want to know what is going on. It is just about receiving information right now.”

Gomez and her husband Paul Chiaro, along with their two boys ages 10, 12, recently made the move across the state from Pueblo to Montrose, where they'll remain until they find a more somewhere in the region. Gomez anticipates her third son, 22, will join them in Montrose soon.

Gomez was raised in southern Colorado and graduated from Rye High School where she was active as the student body president, a pom pom girl, tennis player, and a member of the school's band.

"In a small school like that, everybody does everything," she said. "I worked all through high school. With all of that I learned to have a strong work ethic."

After she graduated from high school she continued to work while she attended Colorado State University-Pueblo. She said she was in and out of school the first couple of years as her interests pulled her into the business sector, where she became the training manager for a company.

"That is where I got my business background and why numbers aren't scary for me," Gomez said. "I worked with profit and loss, managing employees and then, at 21 years old, I went back and finished my degree."

Gomez said she initially wanted to get into a nursing program, but at the time the school was only taking 25 students and she was number 26. While she didn't make it into the program, she did realize that she liked the biology classes she had already taken and, combined with her business training experience, she decided to become a science teacher.

"I loved teaching and I loved talking about biology so I decided that 'gosh, I am a teacher,'" Gomez said.

She graduated from CSU-Pueblo with a degree in biology and elementary education and went on to teach at a high-needs elementary school in the Pueblo School District. While she taught fifth grade, she also developed the first K-5 science program for the Title 1 high-needs school.

"I wrote the grant and developed it," she said. "I really loved it."

After that, the school district offered Gomez an intern program to become a school administrator, where she worked at several schools in the district in the position of Standards Coach for reading, writing and mathematics. At the time, she said she did a lot of work to help develop the schools' development of standards-based classroom curriculum.

"In that, you start where you want the kids to be and then work backwards," she said, adding that during that time she was also very involved at the state level in the development of the assessment program. "I was the state representative on three different committees and did a lot of work heavily for about three years with the state department."

After earning her administrator license, Gomez took on the job as the Secondary Curriculum Coordinator for rural Pueblo School District 70, where she handled the curriculum for the middle and high schools and was the vocational director.

It was in this position where she met the challenges of trying to keep the school district's commitment and promise for uniform learning across schools in a broad region.

"The whole idea of curriculum mapping is if a student takes an algebra class at this high school and another takes one at this high school, they are going to have the same out comes," Gomez said. "We want students shooting from the same knowledge base. It is hard to keep promises like that. It was our goal and it was good work."

As the district's Vocational director, Gomez said she worked to build a program that prepares kids for the workforce.

"I loved the vocational work to make sure students are meeting the demand of the workforce," she said. "Both of these things are very exciting. I really loved my job in District 70."

From there, Gomez was recruited by CSU-Pueblo to head up the Pueblo School for the Arts and Sciences charter school, which was designed completely by the university. During her seven-year tenure there, the charter school was designated as a National Demonstration site for the Paideia Foundation, the state visitation site for the Success for All Foundation, and detailed recognition in a report from the Piton Foundation and Donnell-Kay Foundations titled "Profiles of Success: Eight Colorado Schools that are Closing the Achievement Gap."

Now, with that list of impressive experiences behind her, Gomez, like most administrators across the country, is faced with dwindling school budgets, a high employee turnover rate, and after the upcoming election in November, an almost entirely new school board. Besides listening to what others have to say about the school district right now, Gomez said she is focused on preparing for growth. (Recently, MIT and Harvard researchers predicted that Ridgway will see the majority of future growth in the region over the next 30 years.)

"My main concern right now is preparing for growth," she said. "I have no reason to believe that growth will not come. What we do now is prepare. What does that mean? We have to prepare the facilities and staff to meet the needs of the folks who are going to be living here.

"It's about preparing for all the possibilities," she continued. "There is nothing really alarming going on right now. I truly believe education is all about getting better and taking the next step. We have a good, solid academic program. If we make any changes, we will make changes together as a group."

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