

## Creating A Voice

Latino Chamber Builds Membership, Partnerships

By *GEORGE O'BRIEN*



The Massachusetts Latino Chamber of Commerce, formed in early 2004, is in a growth mode. The agency recently opened a new office in downtown Springfield that features a business center currently incubating four fledgling companies. The LCC is also extending its reach into Worcester County, the Merrimack Valley, and, eventually Boston. The steps are all part of chamber President Carlos Gonzalez's drive to make the Latino business community a stronger force in the state's economy.

As deputy chief of staff to Springfield Mayor Michael Albano, Carlos Gonzalez spent a considerable amount of time working in the realm of small-business development.

Indeed, among his many duties in that capacity was providing assistance to existing and aspiring small business owners in matters ranging from obtaining permits to understanding city sign ordinances.

Over the course of eight years of such work, Gonzalez gained a unique understanding of the city's business community — and also an appreciation for a growing but often overlooked constituency: Latino business owners.

As the number of such entrepreneurs grew, Gonzalez recognized a need to give the group both a 'voice,' as he called it, and a proverbial seat at the table — the one reserved for area business and economic development leaders.

So when the Albano administration ended its tour of duty in 2003, Gonzalez set out to meet that need through formation of the Massachusetts Latino Chamber of Commerce (LCC), or La Cámara de Comercio, as many of its 150 or so members might say.

That number has been rising steadily since the chamber opened its doors (or its door, to be more precise) in March 2004. Then, the fledgling group was renting a small office within the facilities of the New England Farm Workers' Council. As membership and

resources grew, the chamber set its sights on larger quarters and a broader mission.

Both clearly come into view at the LCC's new facility, a 2,400-square-foot suite at offices at 1655 Main St. that opened for business on Oct. 19. In addition to more administrative space, the office features a business center that is now home to four fledgling Latino-owned businesses ranging from a photography studio to an accounting firm.

"The new offices will serve as a one-stop center for small-business development," said Gonzalez. "We want to provide business owners with the tools they need to grow and succeed."

While supplying the physical space and technical assistance needed to help those entrepreneurs in the business center get to the next level, the LCC is working on several different assignments, said Gonzales.

They include everything from a membership drive to the creation of satellite offices in the Worcester area and Merrimack Valley, he told BusinessWest, and collectively they fall under the category of relationship- building.

"By creating relationships and partnerships we help make government officials see the many advantages of the emerging Latino small business community as an economic development engine that is fueling the local and state economy."

BusinessWest looks this issue at how the LCC goes about the process of building those relationships, and how it hopes to build the base of Latino-owned businesses.

The Language of Business When asked if he thought the Latino business community has been under served historically, Gonzalez thought for a minute and decided that overlooked was the more accurate term.

He told BusinessWest that state economic development leaders have put considerable emphasis on luring large corporations to the Commonwealth, at the expense of a broader emphasis on small-business development.

Meanwhile, they have either overlooked or ignored both the surging Latino population, especially in urban areas like Springfield and Holyoke, as well as a recognized entrepreneurial spirit within that constituency.

"Financial institutions have not recognized the Latino community as an economic power base," he explained, adding that Springfield has been recognized as one of the leading centers of new-business development, and the area's minority populations have played a significant role in that movement.

"The Latino community has a strong entrepreneurial spirit ... many people strive to open their own businesses," he explained. "Government officials need to realize this and help generate new Latino businesses."

Gonzalez saw those entrepreneurial tendencies during his tenure in the mayor's office. And when his work there ended when Albano opted out a fifth term, Gonzalez sought a

way to tap into that energy, while also fulfilling his own entrepreneurial aspirations.

Indeed, before joining the Albano administration, Gonzalez served as station manager and producer at WSPR-1270, and played a lead role in the transformation of that facility into a 24-hour Spanish language station. Two years in that role followed by his work with small businesses for Albano gave him a front row seat from which to view the emergence of the Latino business community.

He wanted to give that group a presence and a voice, and his answer was the Latino Chamber, an entity he believed could succeed where a number of other, smaller, Latino-focused chambers with similar goals had not.

“There was a gap,” he said, referring to the emergence — and later the dissolution of several smaller chambers focused on groups like the Latino population. “When you walked around and talked to the small Latino base, few of them were aware of the opportunities available to them, from agencies like the SBA, area chambers, SCORE, and others. We wanted to address that need.”

Gonzalez told BusinessWest that the Latino chamber was created with a number of goals in mind. First and foremost, the agency would act as a resource that would help Latino-owned businesses clear a wide variety of hurdles, from initial business plans to marketing; licenses to financing options.

The LCC is addressing that aspect of its mission through a variety of programs, including workshops and training sessions on a number of subjects.

Beyond that, the chamber was conceived to act as an advocate for the Latino business community, so it is not overlooked in the future as it has been in the past.

As an example, he cited one recently created city program that enables individuals to apply for up to \$30,000 for technical assistance to open vacant storefronts in three neighborhoods, the North End, the South End, and Old Hill.

“There is not a vacant storefront in the North End,” said Gonzales, referring to the predominantly Hispanic neighborhood and speaking figuratively. “We want to help create programs that can better serve the Latino community and help Latino businesses stay in business.

“We’re not asking for any handouts,” he continued, “but we do want to be part of the discussion when these programs are being set forth. And a united voice is the only way to get people to listen.”

To strengthen that voice, Gonzalez said he wants to both expand membership locally — 500 is his immediate, and ambitious, goal and he believes he can achieve that by the end of next year — and extending the LCC’s reach beyond the Pioneer Valley.

He said there are growing Latino populations in Lawrence, Lowell, Worcester, and other communities, and the LCC desires to serve them, through outreach and partnerships generated from the Springfield office, and perhaps through creation of satellite facilities.

"There's a lot of work to be done in these areas," he explained. "We want to reach out ... we think can help build those bases of Latino-owned businesses and create a stronger, more influential group."

## **Building Blocks**

As he talked about the region and state's Hispanic business community and its prospects for the future, Gonzalez drew some parallels to Miami and what has happened in that city over the past quarter century. There, a steadily growing Latino population managed to come together, pool its resources, and forge what he called a "Latino business power base" that made major contributions to Miami's economy.

The same could happen in Massachusetts and, specifically, the Greater Springfield area, said Gonzalez, if effective partnerships are formed between Latino businesses, the LCC, and the community at large ... and if the Latino community as a whole is viewed as a financial resource.

An important part of the equation is building a solid base of Latino ventures, he said, adding that the LCC's business center will play a role on that mission.

Designed to be an incubator that will give start-ups and existing businesses the physical space and support services needed to get off the ground, the center will house businesses until they reach maturity and become ready to move out into the community. "We're going to start by walking, and when we start running, we'll move on and another new business will take our place," said Rene Romero, creative director and coowner of LatinMark, one of the center's tenants.

The business, recently re-named after three years of operating as AdMark, offers an array of services designed to help businesses, Latino-owned and otherwise, to tap into the growing Hispanic market.

A native of Venezuela, Romero first came to the United States in the late '70s to get an education, specifically a degree in marketing and advertising at Louisiana State University. He returned home, but eventually came back to the states in early 2000.

After working for a short time in Boston, he and his wife relocated to Miami to work in advertising.

"We didn't have very good timing," he said, referring to the decline in the Miami area economy in the months after 9/11. "It was a case of being in the right place at the wrong time."

He believes his decision to return to the Northeast has put him in the right place at the right time.

Elaborating, he said Western Mass. has an attractive demographic mix — specifically a growing Latino population — as well as the right geography, a location within a few hours of several major metropolitan areas, including Boston, Hartford, and New York.

While Romero hopes to conduct business in and those cities, his primary focus for now

is the Western Mass. market, where he is providing services to the LCC, several of its members, and other area businesses, while trying, as all small business owners do, to build a name and reputation.

Those are goals common to other tenants in the business center — Ramos Accounting & Tax Services Inc., a start-up venture created by Springfield native Oscar Ramos; MOYO Photography, a two-year-old business operated by Yolanda and Johnny Torres; and Evis Medical Supply, a Connecticut-based company owned by Carlos Alvarez, who is expanding with a Springfield satellite office.

The center's first businesses represent a good cross-section of Latino-owned ventures, said Gonzalez, noting his roster of tenants — and the LCC's membership list — is diverse, with a broad mix of professionals and service providers.

Growing that base is the primary objective for the chamber, he said, noting that the mission will be carried out across the Valley — and across the state.

### **Sign of the Times**

As he gave BusinessWest a tour of the then-unfinished LCC offices, Gonzalez stopped to introduce Blas Rosa, owner of Quick Sign, who was putting the finishing touches on the sign that graces the front lobby.

The chamber tries to support members and other Latino-owned businesses with work like the sign project, Gonzalez explained, adding that its broad mission is to give such ventures much more than small jobs like the new signage.

"The goal is to provide a voice," he stressed, "and as we become bigger and stronger, the voice grows louder."?

George O'Brien can be reached at [obrien@businesswest.com](mailto:obrien@businesswest.com).