

## San Antonio's Quest

*By Bill Hobby*

We've read a lot about job training programs that don't work. This is about one that does.

With manufacturing jobs migrating offshore at a rapid rate, structural unemployment has become one of the most difficult barriers to economic prosperity. For many Americans once able to earn a good wage at a relatively low-skilled job, the future looks grim.

In 1990, San Antonio faced the closing of the Levi-Strauss apparel plant on the South Side, leaving 1,000 employees out of work. Similar dislocations occurred at other major employers, including the Roeglein meat packing plant, San Antonio Shoe, and Kelly Air Force Base.

In the past decade, that city lost approximately 14,000 jobs in manufacturing, textiles, transportation, and construction, while gaining about 19,000 jobs that required higher skills, from health care to legal research.

That triggered the creation of Project QUEST. QUEST is the child of grassroots community organizations guided by the formidable brainpower of Ernesto Cortes, the Southwest Regional Director of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF).

"We could hear the pain. We could hear people asking how they would support their families," said Virginia Ramirez, job training chair of Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS), the San Antonio community group which has tirelessly pursued better streets, better schools, and a better life for the people of low-income neighborhoods.

Joined by another IAF group, Metro Alliance, COPS set about gaining access to higher quality, better-paying jobs through training programs that matched industry needs.

Nearly 300 neighborhood house meetings identified problems with existing programs:

- I. Some were expensive--many students attending proprietary schools took out large loans.
- II. Some provided training only for minimum wage jobs.
- III. Some were inaccessible to families who needed an income to support their families.

The QUEST project was built on interviews with employers, who committed to provide jobs to 650 QUEST participants. The employers helped design training curriculum and forecast future needs. The program was intended to produce long-term employment at family wages with \$7.50 an hour jobs as the benchmark.

The first group of 126 QUEST participants enrolled in January, 1993. COPS and Metro Alliance volunteers did the intake interviews. Marcia Welch of Metro Alliance explained, "We want people who will take this very seriously. It's a long-term project and it needs commitment."

The community organizations also served as the support group for participants, providing motivation and help as problems developed.

Training was demanding, because the occupations included such high-technology areas as electronics, biomedicine, medical records, physical therapy, radiology, medical laboratories, environmental technology, diesel mechanics, accounting and information systems.

Financial support came from the State of Texas, the City of San Antonio, the Ford Foundation and private corporations.

There are now 833 participants in QUEST training. These are some results:

IV. 486 have graduated.

V. 396 have been placed in jobs. Thirty-six are continuing their education, some seeking bachelor's degrees. Four have entered the military. About 50 have not been placed.

VI. The average salary earned is \$7.83 an hour.

A 1996 report to the Ford Foundation said Project QUEST stands out as a potentially important model because it aims at institutional change. Rush Limbaugh has attacked it as for costing too much and taking too long.

QUEST costs money, about \$10,000 a student. It is lengthy - one year to 18 months - compared to some job training programs. It is intended to achieve lasting results, not a temporary, minimum-wage job.

Limbaugh has not computed what it costs to support a family on welfare or the loss to the tax base from unemployment. He evidently hadn't heard of the federal job training program in Puerto Rico that spent \$305,000 per worker placed in a job that lasted for longer than three months.

QUEST is successful and cheap at the price. It is the kind of result we have learned to expect from Ernie Cortes.

*Originally published March 21, 1996 in the Austin American-Statesman.*