

Leadership roles elude Idaho Hispanics

By **Melanie Threlkeld McConnell**

Oscar Hernandez III works a 40-hour week at his father's auto body shop in Caldwell, breaking at noon to train for an hour or so at a local boxing club. By 6 p.m. he's off to Boise State's Canyon County Center, where he's pursuing a degree in business management and administration. Then it's home to study before he sleeps.

His goals are to earn undergraduate and graduate degrees so he can help turn his parents' business into a franchise, and to make the 2000 U.S. Olympic boxing team. He currently is ranked eighth nationally in the lightweight division.

At 19, Hernandez appears to have a bright future. He's ambitious, studious, disciplined and confident. All the makings of a potential leader, right? His profile says yes, and with his determination and parental support he likely will achieve his goals. But will that success turn into a seat on a board of directors, an appointment to a county or state commission, a successful run for local or state government, or a place in a future governor's cabinet?

Not necessarily, if Idaho's current sociopolitical landscape is any indicator.

While Hispanics comprise 7.1 percent of the state's roughly 1.2 million residents and are one of the fastest growing segments of small-business owners in Idaho, they are almost non-existent in Idaho's political arena. And they are less than minimally represented on those decision-making bodies — some high profile, some not — that affect the education, economic status, legal status and quality-of-life of all Idahoans.

So why the void?

Education, economic status, business connections, cultural differences, and failure by current leaders to seek out qualified Hispanics all play a role, experts say.

Hector de Leon, president of the Council on Hispanic Education and a 1994 Boise State graduate, says the issue is Catch-22.

"In order for you to be a leader in this state you have to have one of two things — money or a good education. We don't have good education or the master's or doctorate degrees necessary to be recognized as leaders. You have to be able to make it within the system to make money, which means you have to have your own business."

De Leon and other experts say leadership training for Hispanics must start in junior high school, if not earlier, where children are given the opportunities to participate in school activities that require them to voice their opinions and make decisions that affect others.

Extracurricular activities especially can offer young Hispanics the chance to find their voice, establish themselves as leaders and gain some confidence, says Irene Chavolla, coordinator for Idaho's Title I Migrant Education Program.

But the problem, she notes, is that many Hispanic children in Canyon and Ada counties, home to roughly 20 percent of the state's 86,000 Hispanics, are migrant workers who must hurry home after school to work the fields. They have no time to socialize with others or to participate in sports or academic clubs. Nor do they have the money many of the activities require. The isolation

they may have felt in elementary school and junior high is compounded in high school and after.

Leadership opportunities in business are available for Hispanics, says Silvia Rojas, a business banking administrator for First Security Bank in Boise.

"The buying power in the Hispanic community has grown. Small business is big business in Idaho. The number of Hispanic mom and pop businesses is growing. A lot of these people may not be real fluent in English yet, so they need commercial loan officers who speak Spanish. They need accountants, business planners and financial advisers."

Dan Ramirez, executive director of the Idaho Commission on Hispanic Affairs, agrees.

Idaho leaders are negligent in "continuing to ignore the Hispanic community's potential," he says. "More and more they are gaining influence. They're young U.S. citizens, and they'll soon be eligible to vote."



*Author and artist
Simon Silva talks about
Small-town Brownie,
the book he wrote and
illustrated.*

Ramirez, a 1994 Boise State graduate with a degree in political science, is helping shape this new power group by organizing attorneys, engineers, accountants, entrepreneurs and other young primarily Hispanic professionals to serve as mentors to college students.

"We need to start planting the seeds for their future early on," he says. "We must tell them, 'You're not going to just graduate from high school; you're going to graduate from college.'"

Chavolla, Rojas, de Leon and other Hispanics also work to nurture new generations of

potential Hispanic leaders. Chavolla worked with Boise State migrant educators to organize the Idaho Migrant Student Leadership Institute this summer at Boise State to address the challenges faced by migrant students who suffer because of frequent relocation, social isolation and interrupted schooling.

Nearly 60 area migrant high school sophomores and juniors attended the 12-day event, which featured Hispanic and Latino authors, artists and educators.

The students were required to read books written by Hispanic and Latino authors and discuss them during their daily literature circles. They also were given computer training, educated on the process of applying for college and counseled on what high school courses they needed for college.

For many of the students, it was their first time to sleep away from home and to read a book written by someone who shared their cultural experiences.

"We really wanted to empower the kids," Chavolla says. "We wanted them to feel good about themselves. If they feel good about themselves they'll stay in school and graduate. We told them, 'You have talent. Use it.'"

That message isn't lost on Hernandez. He will fight next in Florida against other Olympic hopefuls. He'll juggle his school work with his travel schedule to make sure his assignments are covered. At 106 pounds he may be a lightweight in the ring, but his determination to succeed should make him a heavyweight contender for a future leadership role. Is anyone taking notice? □