

ALUMNUS AND FORMER PROFESSOR PLEDGE TO BRING NEW PERSPECTIVES

HOMEGROWN LEADERSHIP

Former professor and faculty union president Corina Soto and one-time Southwestern College Sun editor Robert Moreno are the first citizens voted in via new district elections.

BY LILIANA ANGUIANO

Corina Soto embarked on her professional career 32 years ago determined to bring more people of color into leadership positions. Now she is one of the leaders.

In November Chula Vista's District 4 voters swept Soto into elective office for the first time after more than three decades as a professor, counselor and union activist. She said it almost feels like coming full circle.

"The majority of people of color who get their Bachelor's, Master's and Doctorate degrees get their start in community colleges," she said. "So I (wanted) to go work in the community college system because that's where our *gente* are. Not just our *gente* but all people of color and low-income white people, this where they are."

As an employee Soto was an outspoken member of the Southwestern College community who was a consistent advocate for underdogs and the underrepresented.

"I strive to be a voice that's oriented toward equity and justice as well as transparency and accountability," she said.

She was not afraid to speak truth to power, she said, which frequently got her in hot water with college leadership. She served as a union grievance chair, where she was trained in due process and conflict resolution.

"It's been my commitment that people have due process rights, so when I saw a consistent pattern of the administrators violating the due process rights of campus employees and students I was not going to put up with that," she said. "For our system of democracy to matter we must be guided by rule of law and due process."

Soto earned a Bachelor's degree from UC Riverside in Chicano and Administrative Studies, then a Master's from SDSU in education and with an emphasis in multicultural counseling and social justice. Her education and her professional experiences have given her an unwavering commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion, she said.

Southwestern College has slowly climbed

"Most of the people of color who earn degrees get their start in community colleges. I wanted to work here because that's where our *gente* are."

— Corina Soto



DISTRICT AREA 4

CORINA SOTO

A UC Riverside and SDSU graduate, Soto taught and served as a counselor for more than 30 years at Southwestern College. She was active in the Academic Senate and is a former president of the Southwestern College Educators Association, the faculty union. She is a strong proponent of learning communities – manageably sized cohorts of students from underrepresented demographics – and is urging the college to add more sections of programs like Puente, Umoja, Chel and Bayan. While she urges support for developmental students, she also urged college leaders not to ignore gifted and talented students who have a high probability of success with the right resources.



DISTRICT AREA 1

ROBERT MORENO

A proud "National City homeboy" and Sweetwater High School Red Devil, Moreno studied journalism at Southwestern College and served as News Editor of The Sun. He transferred to SDSU where he earned a BA, then embarked on a journalism career at the Chula Vista Star News. Moreno said Southwestern paved the way for his academic success and he would like to help others to achieve their goals by forming more transfer agreements with regional universities. Boosting enrollment and transfer rates are priorities, he said, as are improvements to campus safety for women and members of marginalized communities.

BY LILIANA ANGUIANO

Robert Moreno regretted not filing to run for Southwestern College Governing Board seat #4 last fall.

He made the most of a second chance.

Dr. Gonzalo Jesus Quintero, a former National City Councilmember, was originally the only candidate to apply before the deadline. An error in his filing paperwork, however, required the San Diego County Registrar of Voters to reopen the application period for three days.

Moreno said it seemed like providence.

He discussed a run with his wife, Christina, and she gave her blessing.

The rest, as they say, is history. Moreno pulled one of the County's biggest electoral upsets of 2022 by defeating the better funded, heavily endorsed Quintero. Some of Moreno's early endorsers, in fact, switched later to Quintero.

"(Quintero) had a lot of endorsements," Moreno said. "In fact, he had pretty much all the endorsements. That just fueled my desire to work harder at campaigning. Endorsements look great but they do not always translate into votes. I won because I worked very hard."

Moreno is a rare former SC student elected to its governing board. He was a journalism major who transferred to SDSU in 2007 after serving as News Editor of the Southwestern College Sun. He won state and national awards for his articles about the border and immigration. In 2013 Moreno was honored as Southwestern College Journalism Alumnus of the Year for his work covering underserved communities at the Chula Vista Star News.

His first foray into elective politics ended badly. He accepted an offered from newly-elected Chula Vista City Councilmember Jill Galvez to serve as her chief of staff. Moreno said he enjoyed serving the community and using his position to help people.

"It was a great job until it wasn't," he said.

Galvez, who at the time had mayoral ambitions, pulled a political stunt that shocked the council and the community. During a city council discussion of fire fighters she said

New trustee a rare former SC student, National City and SUHI 'homeboy'

in open session that she was then and there firing her staff member and giving his salary to the city to hire a fire fighter. Besides that fact that Moreno's salary would not pay for fire fighter, a single council member cannot hire anyone.

"It was a cheap piece of political theater," Moreno said. "She did that without ever speaking to me. Everyone in the room gasped when she did it. I was fired publically for a political purpose. When that happened, I thought I was done with politics."

Public condemnation rained down on Galvez who flamed out in her bid to become mayor.

Moreno was born in Chula Vista and raised in National City. He graduated from Sweetwater High School unsure about his goals.

"I was a kid from National City raised by my grandparents, low income," he said. "I didn't know what I wanted in life. Coming to Southwestern changed my life."

Moreno discovered journalism and became more aware of social issues in the South Bay. He found

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ROBERT MORENO

SC governing board member

his voice, he said, and grew fond of telling the stories of underserved people in the community.

"Southwestern gave me a lot," he said. "Now I want to help the students like me who go there today. When I was a student at Southwestern (the college) had the reputation (for taking) a long time to get through, not the 2-3 years we are told when we started. Back then, students could be here for six, seven or eight years. I was surprised this (situation) still exists. It was one of the reasons I ran for the governing board."

Moreno said he would also work to boost enrollment, raise the university graduation rates of Southwestern College transfer students, provide secure housing for low-income students and make the campus a safe space for students and employees.

"I also think we need more partnerships with universities to increase transfers," he said. "Programs like TAG (that guarantee transfers from SC to SDSU) work and benefit our community."

None of this will happen overnight, he said, and will require working cooperatively with his board colleagues and college administrators. He acknowledged that he has much to learn about community college leadership.

"Southwestern College taught me a lot when I was a student and it will teach me again," he said. "My background in journalism and community work will help."

Moreno said he wants to help to encourage new generations of SC students to reach for their dreams.

"Go where the road leads you and keep your foot on the gas," he said. "And during your journey keep believing in yourself. If you do that and stick with it, you will get where you want to go."

Former professor wants to scale up effective learning communities

on the EDI train, she said, and has much more work to do to become a productive institution of higher education that honors and elevates its students and community. Soto said she would like to see the college combine personal development classes with ethnic studies and history classes.

"The ethnic studies and history classes are to learn about who we are in a society and what contributions our peoples have made and what contributions others have made," she said. "(When we understand) others we can be more respectful and we can value other people more," she said. "That's how we create a more inclusive society."

Soto represents Southwestern Community College District Area 4, the largest of the five. It includes most of eastern Chula Vista, parts of San Ysidro and borderlands San Diego. It is the district in which the main campus resides. She said the new district elections made it possible for a

person on a teacher's salary to consider elective office.

"District elections made running for the board more plausible and more affordable," she said. "I don't think I could have been competitive in the district-wide elections we used to have. It was just too big and too hard to get your message to enough voters."

SC is an important hub of the South Bay that does great work for the community, Soto said, but she also said the college should not rest on its laurels.

"One of the things I want to do is educate the community (about) the things that we are doing and more of the things we are capable of doing because Southwestern is capable of doing more," she said.

Soto said the college has "secret gems" called learning communities that are very successful at elevating students, but too small to reach enough students. SC's best known learning communities are Puente, which supports Latinos, Bayan, tailored for Filipinos, Umoja, created to help Black students and CHEL, for students who identify as LGBTQ. Although each of these support communities have demonstrated great success over the years, SC administrators have in the past dismissed them as "boutique programs" that are too expensive to expand or clone. Soto said she rejects those excuses.

"We need more learning communities because those have the highest rate of students graduating and transferring," Soto said. "That's our mission, verdad? If we have a program that works and we cannot offer to every student, we need to look at ways to replicate their success."

SC's shuttered Woman's Resource Center needs to be reestablished, Soto said, because it was effective and there is great need.

"Women are about 57 percent of all college and university students now, but they face many of the same problems they did 20-30 years ago," she said. "Once upon a time we had an outstanding Women's Resource Center that helped a lot of women and their families. We seem to have plenty of money for other projects and for more administrators, but we need to reinvest in our students."

A demographic SC ignores are gifted students and high achieving students in the community who have vast promise but lack the resources to attend top universities right out of high school. Soto said she would like to see SC court students who have taken AP and IB classes at feeder high schools.

"We do a lot for other students, but we don't necessarily do anything for those gifted students," she said. "A lot of our community's best students are underserved and do not live up to their potential. We need to capture

more students (who have taken AP classes) because they have the highest likelihood of going on to get that Bachelor's, Master's and Doctorate degrees," she said. "Nothing succeeds like success."

Students stay at SC for too long, Soto said. Programs designed for two years frequently take 4-6 years because students have to work or struggle with basic skills. She would like to help more students to transfer in two years by taking 15 units a semester instead of 9-12.

One of SC's most troubling problems, Soto said, is its treatment of part-time adjunct teaching staff.

"The majority of the (adjunct) faculty, around 700 of them, have Master's degrees and some even have Doctorates but they are lucky to make \$24,000 a year at Southwestern College," she said. "I think that's inappropriate. Adjuncts teach most of our classes. We could not run the college without them."

Soto said colleges should be bastions of free speech and critical thinking that encourage creativity, problem solving and the advancement of humanity.

"That's why we're here, right?" she said. "We should think big and have lofty, audacious dreams and visions. That's what will make Southwestern College an even better place for our community. I am eager to do my part to help get us there."