

LAKE COUNTY LEADERS

Leadville's Gloria Perez: Success, One Step at a Time

By Jim Brown, PhD

Some people have the privilege at an early age of planning exactly what they want to do with their lives. For others, the path is not as easy and the choices are not as clear. They work hard to address the challenges and take advantage of opportunities when given a chance.

When asked about her life's plan and the journey she has taken, Gloria Perez says, "I'm definitely a one-step-at-a-time person. I had to deal with some obstacles before I could start thinking about a plan, and there were even more challenges afterwards. Whatever success I've had is at least partly due to the work ethic I inherited from my parents. They've been hard-working all of their lives."

This is the story of how Gloria's life began in Mexico, how it brought her to the United States, and how she has become one of the most respected and influential public service leaders in Leadville, Lake County, and Colorado. But the story doesn't start with Gloria.

New Country, New Language

"For many years, my grandfather would come to the United States to work, then return to Mexico and be with his family. My father, starting when he was 17 or 18 years old, did the same thing. They both worked as skilled stone masons in the construction business, first in San Bernardino, then Lake Tahoe. When my mom and dad decided to move to the U.S., I was 10 years old. They wanted me and my brother to have the opportunities this country offers, and they wanted us to learn how to speak English."

"We lived in Nevada for about a year. In the early 1990s, Vail was booming and we moved to Leadville so he could be close to his work.

My mother made connections with people who worked as housekeepers in Vail, and that was her introduction to the work force. She worked in Vail for many years, then found work as a janitor at the schools in Leadville."



"When we moved here, I was in the 5th grade and one of only two students in my class who spoke only Spanish. Within a year and a half, she and I were completely fluent in English. Being bilingual has helped me ever since."

"My parents also wanted me to stay connected to my Mexican heritage. When I was in the 8th grade, I went back to Mexico and lived with my grandparents for four months, speaking Spanish and interacting with my aunts, uncles, and cousins. Being part of that culture again was a significant time in my life."

At school, Gloria was not involved in many student activities. "My parents were here to work," explains Gloria. "They were new to the culture and didn't have experience or knowledge of how to get their kids involved in extracurricular activities like clubs and sports. Even in high school, I spent most of my free time with my friends and with my future husband, Rodrigo, who I met when I was a sophomore. At that stage of my life, school was a challenge. There were times when I didn't attend classes regularly."

AmeriCorps—When the Light Started Turning On

When Gloria was a senior in high school, she learned about the AmeriCorps program through one of her teachers. The program provides living stipends and connects Americans to service opportunities that meet community needs in education, safety, health, security, and the environment.

“That’s when the light starting turning on for me,” recalls Gloria. “Not all the way on, but it was a start. AmeriCorps gave me the opportunity to earn credits and finish my high school education. It also gave me experiences that were significant and made a difference in people’s lives. I worked as a teaching assistant for three years and even started thinking about going to college.”

[While in high school and during her AmeriCorps service, Gloria worked on weekends cleaning an athletic club in Vail. After AmeriCorps, she worked as a front desk agent at the club’s hotel.]

But college was put on hold. “Rodrigo and I got married, and I became a mom at 19. That was Eddie, and three years later we had our second son, Fabian. We were having personal and financial problems, and it was a very emotional period for me. I wanted to keep working and over the next few years had jobs at a bank and at two nonprofit agencies.” [More on that below.]

“I woke up one morning and said to myself that I needed to go to college. If we were going to have the things we wanted in life, a college degree would give me a higher education and better income.”

Gloria had been given an AmeriCorps Education Award of \$2,500 that would have expired if she didn’t use it.

She made an appointment at Colorado Mountain College (CMC) to take the placement test, and asked

her parents to help with the boys.

“I remember my mom saying to me, ‘Yes, get a college education. We don’t have money to help pay for college or any assets that you’ll inherit when we pass, but we can help you with your kids so you can get an education.

“I’ll see where this takes me,” said Gloria. She was on her way, and that light bulb was getting brighter.

[At CMC, she worked full-time as a domestic violence victims advocate, then at Full Circle of Leadville, where she facilitated parenting classes.]

“After I enrolled, I really enjoyed being back in school. I was making A’s in my classes, and that kept me motivated to keep going. I became curious about getting a bachelor’s degree when I talked to other students and heard that is what they were doing. I talked to my professors about transferring to a university where I could pursue a degree in business after finishing my associate degree at CMC.”

Regis, Then a Critical Challenge

Regis University in Denver offered a program for working professionals that allowed a student to take night courses and weekend or cluster courses to earn a degree in business administration. Gloria was accepted and began the next phase of her journey.

By that time, she was working at a property management company—a job she almost didn’t get. “I saw that this company wanted to hire a person to manage Mountain View Village—a manufactured home community—and the salary was more than my nonprofit jobs.

I applied and met with the owner, who didn’t want to hire me because, ‘I was a sweet girl who would have a hard time working with tenants.’ I asked him to please check my references, call them, and give me this opportunity. He did, but I had to convince him.”

It took Gloria two more years to earn her BS in Business Administration at Regis, where she had a Community Transfer Scholarship to help with expenses.

Two days a week, after getting off work, she commuted to Denver for classes from 6:00 pm until 10:00. On weekends, she would leave on Friday for intensive classes that evening and all day on Saturday. She took full course loads each semester. Near the end of her time at Regis, she was pregnant with their third son, Alexander.

Shortly after graduating from Regis, the economy collapsed again during the country's housing crisis. People in Leadville lost their jobs, couldn't pay their mortgages, and moved out of mobile homes. Rodrigo lost his job at a company where he had worked many years, and along with it the family's medical insurance. Gloria's work hours were cut from 40 to 24 a week.

"Wraparound found me."

Back in the job market, Gloria went to the Human Services office to ask about resources.

The director heard her voice at the front desk and said, "Is that Gloria out there? Come on in and let's talk about an opening here." The job opening was for Wraparound, a program that serves children, young adults, and families experiencing complex needs.

The position was only 15 hours a week to pilot the initiative, but it was a perfect fit at the time for Gloria. Within a few months, the person leading the initiative left for a position in education and Gloria was offered the full-time job as Supervisor. She resigned from Mountain View Village and accepted the offer.

Her life experiences helped her identify with the needs of Wraparound clients. Gloria: "I didn't find the Wraparound job. It found me. Everything I have learned in Wraparound has helped me in my own life and in raising my children."

Every workday, she uses the bilingual skills developed in a 5th grade Leadville school. Now everyone in her family is bilingual.



Lake County Wraparound Program staff members stand together for a photo. From left is Care Coordinator Grant Lee, Program Supervisor Gloria Perez and Financial Assistance and Case Manager Nancy Contreras.

Photo credit: *Herald Democrat*



Gloria Perez introducing the nonprofit education series, Leadville Leads! October 15, 2022.

She can start a sentence in one language and finish it in another, and claims that her preferred language is "Spanglish."

Does Gloria ever take time to get away and unwind from the demands of work? "Yes, I enjoy hiking, running, and shopping. Not in that order."

Difference Makers: Boettcher Foundation

In 2022, Gloria became the first Lake County resident to be awarded the Boettcher Foundation Doers and Difference Makers Fellowship. It is a fully-funded, nine-month commitment that involves three, two-day leadership training retreats at various sites in Colorado, monthly 90-minute virtual sessions, and frequent coaching sessions. On completion, each Fellow is awarded a grant of up to \$10,000 to further leadership development or pursue training or education.

Gloria used part of her grant to enter and complete a six-week Women's Leadership Program through Yale University. It is designed to develop skills and knowledge to take advantage of women's unique strengths and characteristics as tools for the person, her team, and her organization.

Gloria and Rodrigo have passed their commitment to hard work and education onto their children. She was not the first or only member of her family to receive a Boettcher Foundation award.

In 2021, their son, Fabian, became a recipient of the Boettcher Foundation Scholarship, which he is using to attend Colorado School of Mines. For making a positive influence on his community through voter registration drives, Fabian was one of eight recipients recognized with the 2021 Colorado Governor's Citizenship Medal. His older brother, Eddie, graduated from Metropolitan State University with a degree in construction management and is working for a general contractor in Vail. Alexander is a 7th grade math whiz who wants to become an NBA player. All of Gloria and Rodrigo's sons think big.

[Rodrigo owns a stone masonry company and is an elite ultramarathoner who participates in the Leadville Race Series events, including the 100-mile trail run in which he raises money for the Leadville Legacy Foundation. "An inspiration and amazing runner," says his wife.]

You can, too.

Gloria Perez, who now serves on the Lake County Community Fund board of directors, has a message for those who are facing some of the same challenges she experienced in her 30 years as a resident of Leadville.

“My message is to use what you have learned from your experiences—good and bad—to build a foundation for your future. I was never sure about saying “yes” to something because I didn’t know where “yes” might take me. When you face obstacles to what your life might become, you may not have a clear plan or path to success. You might not think you have the skills. I had to find the right path for myself, one step at a time. You can, too.

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