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Jesse Romero: Gearing Up For 2007

By Robert H. Leos

Jesse Romero grew up in Yoakum, Texas, graduated from Southwest Texas State University, and began a career in community organization and politics in the late 1980's. During the course of his career, Jesse has worked with the Southwest Voter Registration Project, the Mexican American Legislative Caucus, Senator Rodney Ellis, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF), U.S. Representative Ciro Rodriguez, and the Center for Policy Alternatives. In 2004, he became Principal with Haley Romero Winick & Kroll, Inc., in Austin, Texas. Mr. Romero's firm represents a broad spectrum of clients including city governments, educational entities, environmental concerns, and other organizations interested in having a voice in Austin during legislative sessions. As a registered lobbyist, Jesse Romero also represents the Texas Association for Bilingual Education (TABE).

I've known Jesse Romero for several years. It was only recently, however, that I learned about his growing up in Yoakum, his accomplishments as a community organizer, and his interests and work in politics. He discussed these topics and others when we met in his office on Congress Avenue in downtown Austin.



Mr. Jesse Romero

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Growing Up In Yoakum

I come from a family of nine children. My father passed away when I was ten months old. My mom worked in a hospital, raised all of us by herself; never re-married. We lived below the poverty line and I was the first person to go to college; actually, the first to not only go to college, but to graduate. If you look at the state of education in this country—the greatest country on God’s green earth, just having a bachelor’s degree is equated to just having a high school diploma. But if you look at Latinos, fewer than a quarter of them even have that. That is one of the reasons that I have been so involved in educational issues throughout my career.

When I grew up in Yoakum, Texas, Yoakum was very rural, very Anglo, and very conservative. It was an English-only environment which helped me in *that* community. I grew up watching Mr. Rogers, Sesame Street, and Masterpiece Theatre. I didn’t watch Cantinflas; I didn’t watch Univision. And this helped me tremendously in Yoakum because I saw classmates with accents who were sent directly to special education. Even growing up the way that I did, speaking English, the teachers did not provide academic counseling. You were on your own! Talk about “sink or swim,” “bootstraps,” etc., that was how it was in those days. So many of the Latino students just lost interest, perhaps got sidetracked or in trouble, and just dropped out. I figure that Yoakum was just a microcosm of what was happening across the country to Hispanics in the educational system. If you go to Yoakum now, 65% of the students in Kindergarten through Grade 8 are Hispanic. I saw the demographics changing by the time I was graduating from high school.

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Yoakum is famous for its leather products. There are slaughter houses in the area. Beef is big. They take the hides to the rendering plants and produce belts and saddles and sell those products internationally. The company started bringing in immigrants which, over the years, changed the face of the workforce from mainly white to mainly Mexicano. This essentially divided the community and created the fear that the Mexicanos were taking the jobs that the white community wanted.

At that time, in the late 70’s, students had a choice of going off to the big city, usually Houston, to work, or, staying in Yoakum and working in the leather factory (That’s how I became a Houston Rockets fan, but that’s another story!). So you go to the big city, you work, and you make more money. I had been going to Houston during the summers, while I was in high school, but decided to go to college after high school instead.

I had never thought about college during high school; never had a counselor to encourage me to go to college. During my senior year, an uncle of mine, Leo Garza, asked me if I was going to college. He said, “You can get financial aid. You can get a Pell Grant.” So I went to the school counselor and asked him about financial aid for college. He told me that I didn’t need to concern myself with it because he had a job lined up for me at the leather company in Yoakum.

I speak to student groups often. I tell young people that there’s nothing wrong with hard work. My mom was a cook at the community hospital for many years. We were poor but we always had what we needed. But we have choices. I always knew that I could beat a book; I always knew I was good at taking tests. So I knew that instead of

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going to Houston to do all this heavy construction work, I preferred to read books and pursue the college route. I tell them that books open up a whole new world; you learn about events in the world, about history and geography. You become better prepared for whatever career you choose.

Early Political Involvement

I've been involved in politics for about twenty years. I was trained in Chicago as a community organizer. Part of the training was learning how to communicate with members of the community; through telephone calls and emergency meetings that we held throughout the communities. I did that in Chicago and then worked in Kansas. We would work with the churches, community activists, environmentalists, people who represented whatever the issue happened to be.

Following the training, I did a stint with the Mexican American Legislative Caucus. During that time, I met a gentleman who was affiliated with Willie Velasquez at the Southwest Voter Registration Project in San Antonio. He introduced me to Willie after the legislative session had ended and my work as an intern with the Caucus had ended. I really wanted to stay in politics and I got a job with the Southwest Voter Registration Project.

I'll never forget my first assignment at the Southwest Voter Registration Project. My job was go to the Hispanic communities in the South Texas/coastal area, near Yoakum, Edna, and Wharton. There was a congressional district that stretched from the suburbs of Houston; from East Bernard to Rosenberg, all the way to Port Lavaca, south of Victoria. I was charged to Willie to with the task of registering 2,000 people a week to vote. When I first got the assignment, I thought,

"There's no way I can register 2,000 people a week." But Willie always used the term "doable" and I grasped on to that concept. I learned that if you broke it down and registered 500 people each week, or each day or each hour, the task was doable.

My job was to work with the Hispanic community to help organize the community, help identify potential Hispanic candidates for public office, and help change the at-large voting system that many of those towns had at the time. I am proud of the fact that in the very short span of time that I was involved in this effort, the Hispanic community in Cuero, Texas had organized itself and changed from the at-large system to a single member district system. In that process they also elected the first African American school board member first Hispanic city council member.

Mr. Jesse Romero

1987-1990: Southwest Voter Registration Project.

1991-1993: Staff Director, Mexican American Legislative Caucus.

1993-1994: Senator Rodney Ellis.

1995-1997: Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund.

1997-2000: Congressman Ciro Rodriguez, San Antonio.

2000-2003: Center For Policy Alternatives.

Since 2004: Principal, Haley Romero Winick & Kroll, Inc., Austin, Texas.

At that time, the Panhandle had just one minority elected official. In just ten years, they had 90. I'm proud of my role in getting people to take part in government, to take a role in their child's education, to go to school board meetings where they had never gone

before, to testify before school boards and city councils and to just get involved in the community. I'm proud to say that many of the individuals that I worked with in Texas and New Mexico are still on school boards, are mayors of their towns, on the city councils, and are state representatives, senators, and congressmen to this day.

In 1991, I came back to the Mexican American Legislative Caucus as staff director. That experience taught me about consensus building and about reaching out to others with different points of view. I later worked in the Texas House of Representatives, moved over to the Texas Senate to work for Senator Rodney Ellis. That was where I met Anthony Haley and later Seth Winick. Ten years later we started Haley Romero Winick, Inc. and added John Kroll recently. I also did some work for Congressman Ciro Rodriguez, working in his San Antonio office.

The 2007 Legislative Session

We're beginning to review the bills that were pre-filed. Some of these are calling for English only. Some are calling for the end of bilingual education. Never mind that this is the law of the land at the federal and state levels. We need to review the bills and figure out what's in front of us—try to understand how they would affect the education community and the business community.

In terms of representing TABE, we continue to try to educate members by conducting forums across the state and working with legislative staff. The staff members are particularly important. I know because I used to be a staffer.

Our main goal, at TABE, is to emphasize that bilingual education, although it concerns the school house, is also about economic development.

It's about the economic viability of this state.

TABE's agenda for this legislative session is to continue education, to continue building those relationships, and where appropriate, to provide testimony from our experts—at the academic level and at the classroom level, about bilingual education.

Author's Note

In 1994, a challenge to the at-large system of city council elections in Yoakum, Texas was successful. It resulted in Yoakum converting to single member districts. It also resulted in the election of the first African American to the city council and the election of Annie Rodriguez, Jesse Romero's cousin, as mayor of Yoakum, Texas.



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