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## San Antonio Fatherhood Campaign grows from vision of concerned fathers

By Linda Wilson, *Making Connections-San Antonio* Diarist

In San Antonio, an idea that began with the vision of a handful of concerned Latino/Chicano and Native-American fathers has quickly developed into an organized community campaign to promote responsible fatherhood to fathers of all ages. *Making Connections-San Antonio* and the AECF Fatherhood initiative are helping the organizers expand their effort to a larger segment of the community.

The San Antonio Fatherhood Campaign spun off from work being done by several groups who were involved with programs directed to helping young men and teens. Two already established organizations, the American Indians in Texas-Spanish Colonial Missions (AIT-SCM) and the San Antonio National Compadres Network (SANCN), provided early support.

Their work in SANCN's organizational efforts to mentor young men caused the founders to question the role of fathers in the broader community. Seeing that fathers are often overlooked and undervalued, they questioned what could be done to improve the roles men play as fathers.

Ten fathers who subsequently developed the Fatherhood Campaign were eager to celebrate and share their personal devotion to family, culture and community. They took the lead in developing the Fatherhood Campaign.

Initially, the founders of the Fatherhood Campaign were just friends and colleagues meeting together in a *Circulo de Hombres* (Circle of Men) - sharing ideas, wisdom, philosophy and the value of their individual personal experiences. Since many members of the group are Native American, as well as Latino/Chicano, they borrowed heavily from tribal customs, occasionally incorporating such things as the *Circulo* (Talking Circle) of elders.

They also incorporated ideas from trainings given by Jerry Tello. Tello is an internationally recognized writer, trainer and expert on Latino fathers, family strengthening, and responsibility/fatherhood issues. Tello's work is based on the ancient *Codice Florentino* (Florentine Codex) of Mexican indigenous people. The *Codice Florentino*, a spiritual code rich in ancient teachings about male youth development, emphasizes becoming a balanced person. The "Rites of Passage" curriculum designed by Tello utilizes storytelling to help youth in their self-development.

Recognition of the work of the San Antonio fathers spread by word of mouth. Others joined the group. After awhile, the group began to ask themselves, "If we are doing all this on a part-time basis with no funding, how much more could we do as a formal, funded initiative?" They set out to seek some funding to expand their efforts.

The work got a boost in 2002, when one of the core organizations, AIT-SCM, secured a grant from the Texas Department of Health (TDH) to expand the fatherhood and male involvement efforts. AIT-SCM had already offered office space in its own headquarters building, which is

located in San Antonio's West Side (in the heart of the *Making Connections – San Antonio* area). With the TDH grant, the group could expand its work to other fathers in the community.

Several organizations joined to form the network nucleus or “Core Group” of the San Antonio Fatherhood Campaign. The “Core Group” includes: American Indians of Texas-Spanish Colonial Missions (AIT-SCM), Southwest Key Program, Inc., Juvenile Outreach and Vocational/Educational Network (JOVEN), AVANCE-San Antonio, San Antonio National Compadres Network (SANCN), M.A.T.C.H./P.A.T.C.H, and Project Worth, as well as *Making Connections-San Antonio*. Although each organization has a slightly different objective, each dedicates a major portion of its work to strengthening families, fostering male responsibility, supporting fatherhood, and raising awareness of Latino and Native American cultures.

Fatherhood Campaign Coordinator Frank Castro points out that the campaign is inclusive, designed to be a family strengthening effort that extends out from the Fatherhood Partners to include family partners, community/neighborhood partners and support/referral partners.



The campaign has several objectives:

- To bring new positive awareness to the importance of families and fatherhood,
- To provide helpful resources for fathers, grandfathers and surrogate fathers.
- To tie together existing services, including maintenance of an events calendar for all organizations involved with the campaign,
- To promote fatherhood events and seek more participation and funding for these activities.

Technical support from *Making Connections-San Antonio* and funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation enabled the campaign to greatly expand its services and resources. *Making Connections-San Antonio* Site Team Leader Victor Azios invited AECF Program Associate Maurice Moore to make a site visit to San Antonio, so that Moore could meet with Ramon Vasquez, one of the founders of the Fatherhood Campaign. At that time, the campaign was in its embryonic stages.



Moore helped the group secure an AECF grant that allowed them to take the Fatherhood Campaign to a broader segment of the community. A Fatherhood Hotline, (210) 227-3463, was established and staffed. Fathers calling the hotline receive information and referral to programs, classes and support groups available in San Antonio. The AECF grant, along with technical assistance from the local MC-SA Communications Team, helped the Fatherhood Campaign obtain widespread publicity, including billboard ads, media announcements, news articles, and TV coverage and talk-show opportunities. A colorful brochure/fact sheet was also funded in part from the AECF grant.

San Antonio Fatherhood Campaign Coordinator Frank Castro points out the importance of AECF’s involvement. Castro says, “*Making Connections – San Antonio* and AECF opened doors and provided opportunities for the Fatherhood Campaign to expand our work into the community. All we had was the idea. MC-SA and the Foundation gave us the tools to push on quickly in a shorter time frame.”

Strong principles of spirituality, respect for history and value of the traditional *compadre* network, or extended family system, are interwoven throughout the efforts of the Campaign. Castro describes the importance of the mutual support that men are giving each other through the network they have formed.

“We call ourselves *Compadres*,” says Castro. “It’s a title we take on respectfully and it’s a mutual understanding that we are all working toward the same fatherhood initiatives. *Compadre* is a word compounded from two Spanish words, *como* (like) and *padre* (father), and the word expresses the effort we take regarding our roles in fatherhood. When you’re a *Compadre*, you don’t just worry about yourself and your children. As a *Compadre*, I will take responsibility not just for my child, but for your child also.”

Children are at the heart and focus of the Fatherhood Campaign. The organizers recognize that children whose fathers have a good self-image and involve themselves in their children’s lives provide their children with better opportunities to a healthy lifestyle. “We recognize fathers who are not necessarily involved in formal parenting classes or who might not have received recognition,” says Castro. “They are simply fathers who are doing great things –who are so involved that they are compelled to teach others.” Castro is quick to point out that all men are welcome to the *Circulo*, regardless of age, nationality or background.

Miguel Acosta, another of the original ten founders and Chairman of San Antonio's division of the National Compadres Network, describes the impact these programs have for men who are brought up in San Antonio's mean streets of gang activity and violence. "In our culture," says Miguel, "we were taught not to cry – to be the strong ones. The *Circulo* is a support group for men where we can transition by expressing our emotions."

Castro describes one of the group's most exemplary members. "We have a *Compadre* involved in our *Circulo* who had been in trouble with the law as a young man. Now, as one of our longtime members, he is an inspiration and encouragement to all of us. Recently, he was voted "Parent of the Year" at his child's school! He's a humble man – who just wants to help. He is greatly involved in his family's life and with the other *Compadres*. When he says he will do something, he does it! He follows through. He has *palabra* (keeps his word)"

Each June, the San Antonio Fatherhood Campaign celebrates its Annual Father's Day Fiesta outdoors at the Plaza Guadalupe, with an estimated 500 people in attendance. The Fiesta itself is a story reflective of the success of the Fatherhood Campaign's rapid expansion.

Frank Castro comments, "The Fiesta is a manifestation of the *Compadres'* commitment. When we first started, it was small - like a picnic. We used our own money to fund some food and games for the kids. We wanted to have fun, promote fatherhood, and give out information fathers could use. Now, in our fourth year, it has grown to over 40 community partners and receives community support from city government leaders and other public figures."



The Father's Day Fiesta features food, entertainment provided by children in the community and activities fathers and children can do together, such as Father's Day card-making and crafts. Nonprofit organizations provide information, do health screenings and offer services of interest to fathers and their children. A culmination of the Father's Day event is an awards ceremony that honors six to ten *Hombres Nobles* (Noble Men), who are selected by their peers for the awards because of special things they have done in their roles as men, fathers, grandfathers, uncles and stepfathers.

For Ramon Vasquez, Frank Castro and the other founders, realization of the Fatherhood Campaign is like a dream come true. Vasquez says, "It's like one of those visions you embark on and finally find you made it. You are there. Now, it's about keeping the fire lit. I think this campaign will stay around for as long as there are good men who want to keep putting this message out. "

Given the fundamental importance of their work, coupled with the strong resolve and dedicated unity of the organizers, it is hard to imagine that San Antonio's Fatherhood Campaign could do anything but continue.