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'A THOUGHTFUL TRANSITION'

UTEC FOUNDING MEMBER BECOMES NEW BOARD CHAIR

Vasquez: 'It has been such a great experience to watch the growth'



Reading Cooperative Bank Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer Marianela Vasquez, a UTEC board member and founding young adult, is UTEC's newest board chair as the organization renews its search for a new CEO. Former Chair Scott Mellen is stepping back from the role, but is remaining on the board.

LOWELL — Violence prevention nonprofit UTEC is welcoming one of its original founding young adults to serve as chair of the organization's board of directors amid a renewed search for a new CEO.

When Marianela Vasquez was a junior at Lowell High School in the late 1990s, she had been working part time in the city's Streetworker program at a time of intensifying gang violence within the city. After one night in which there were multiple homicides in Lowell, Vasquez and other youth and young adults decided more needed to be done.

"The one sort of common theme was that nobody wants to be out here doing this, but we don't have a space to go that is safe," Vasquez said in a video call Wednesday.

That space would come together in the form of the United Teen Equality Center, now simply known as UTEC, with a facility established in 2006 in the former St. Paul's United Methodist Church building at 35 Warren St. Since UTEC's founding in 1999, it has served the Merrimack Valley through various programs aimed at curbing street violence. Those include its Street Outreach and Violence Intervention program aimed at meeting at-risk young adults "where they are at" and peacemaking between gangs.

UTEC's Behind the Walls program approaches the issue from correctional facilities, by making outreach to incarcerated young adults to help them create reentry programs and reduce criminal recidivism.

In the intervening years since UTEC's founding, Vasquez has directly worked for the organization on and off. She continued the work after the founding until she left for college, returned during her college career, served on the original board and took part in the hiring of CEO Gregg Croteau. She spent her career in financial tech across several major companies like Fidelity, State Street Wealth, Numerated Growth Technologies and most recently as the chief operating officer of Reading Cooperative Bank.

Vasquez remained a supporter of UTEC throughout that time and was even gifted one of the organization's signature cutting boards during her first meeting with her CEO at RCB, made by young adults in UTEC's woodworking social enterprise program. She rejoined the board two years ago.

"It has been such a great experience to watch the growth," Vasquez said of UTEC's progress since its founding. "I had sort of been watching from afar, but I came back and had the opportunity to be a big part of it again."



UTEC board member Marianela Vasquez speaks on stage at the nonprofit's 25th anniversary gala Nov. 20, 2024. Vasquez has been named the newest board chair as Scott Mellen steps back from the role but remains on the board.

UTEC started with Lowell, but has since expanded its operations to Haverhill and Lawrence. While Vasquez and others like Croteau said they would love to see further expansion, she said the organization's main focus

right now is their existing scope in the Merrimack Valley, especially amid a renewed search for a CEO and cuts to federal grants that benefited organizations like UTEC.

“I am extremely excited to come back and make sure the organization continues to strengthen and we continue to ground our service in our market,” said Vasquez.

Croteau had announced in 2023 that he would step aside from his role of CEO and remain with the organization in other capacities, but, two years on, that search is being renewed.

Vasquez succeeds Scott Mellen as chair of UTEC’s board, a position he has held since 2018 after first joining the board in 2016. Mellen’s choice to step back from the chairmanship was the result of what he said was the right time, and finding the right successor, and that he will otherwise remain as a member of the board.

“I am a big believer that change is critical in leadership,” said Mellen. “I’ve been in the leadership role for some time ... The key issue was finding the right time and the right person to take over the leadership role ... Mari has been a joy to work with. It seemed like the right time, and she has the lived experience I, frankly, don’t have.”

Croteau said Vasquez brings a different perspective to the board as one of UTEC’s founding young adults.

“Having Mari as a partner is really important. She brings a unique lens to focusing on young adults,” said Croteau. “In the same way we are bringing on a new CEO and the transition for that, we believe it is important to have a thoughtful transition for the chair.”



UTEC’s new board of directors Chair Marianela Vasquez, left, and CEO Gregg Croteau at the nonprofit’s 25th anniversary gala at the Lowell Memorial Auditorium Nov. 20, 2024. Vasquez, a founding UTEC young adult, is succeeding former Chair Scott Mellen, who is stepping back from the role he has held since 2018 but remaining on the board.