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TOP STORY

Full Circle hires Contreras as director

by Emma Gadeski Herald Reporter

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Eudelia Contreras is Full Circle of Lake County's new executive director. Contreras draws from a diverse background in both government and nonprofit leadership roles, with previous experience as president of the Lake County School District Board of Education and director of community impact at Lake County Build a Generation. Contreras hopes to inspire community members who are struggling and further reach marginalized groups.

Photo by Emma Gadeski

Full Circle of Lake County is welcoming Eudelia Contreras as its new executive director. Contreras will officially begin in the role on May 30.

Contreras draws from a diverse background in both government and nonprofit leadership roles, with previous experience as president of the Lake County School District Board of Education and director of community impact at Lake County Build a Generation (LCBAG). She has extensive interpretation abilities and has provided these services in the community for years.

Contreras will replace former executive director Stephanie Cole, who announced her resignation earlier this year.

Contreras hopes to inspire community members who are struggling and further reach marginalized groups. "I'm super excited about this new role," said Contreras. "I thought about whether I should apply or not because I don't have the traditional experience, but what I can bring to Full Circle is the lived experience and identify what the community needs are."

Contreras moved to Leadville around 30 years ago with her family and attended elementary school here as a first grade student from California. They originally immigrated to the United States from Mexico.

She remembers being held back from Kindergarten in California since she didn't know English, which left a lingering message of "I'm not smart enough." That obviously wasn't the case, but there just wasn't the interpretation and language support available to help her and other Spanish speakers learn the language and thrive.

"There really weren't any efforts to integrate any of us," said Contreras of her time in school. "The immigrant kids felt very pushed to the side and didn't have the support we needed. We've come very far in our school system, but there's still room to grow."

When she moved to Lake County and started going to school, Contreras found some key support from two of her teachers, Gloria Romero and Jeri Chavez. These educators also spoke Spanish and made her feel welcomed and supported in learning the English language. "By the end of first grade I was very fluent," said Contreras.

Pulling from her experience integrating here as a young kid has been beneficial in government and nonprofit work as Contreras has really been able to connect with the Spanish-speaking community.

One of her first jobs in Lake County was with the Department of Human Services (DHS), where she worked as a public assistance technician and in child support.

“I started to learn about the disparities in Lake County, and that was very interesting,” said Contreras, who previously felt a bit disconnected from the community working in Beaver Creek in Eagle County.

Working at DHS felt like an opportunity to really help people navigate not only the administrative side of signing up for benefits, but also cultural barriers and stigma, said Contreras.

Interpretation also proved essential to the role, which came naturally to her after growing up interpreting for her parents, neighbors and family. “I was really able to see both the English and Spanish communities by having that skill.”

Later on, Contreras decided it was time for something different and shared her resume with former LC BAG Executive Director Katie Baldassar during a workshop on facilitation skills. Since Contreras was already interpreting for LC BAG events, she figured it could be a good fit.

Contreras started as a safe routes to school coordinator and later moved onto a health equity position, fully immersing herself in the world of philanthropy, nonprofits and grant logistics.

She spent a lot of time organizing communities in the manufactured home parks around the county, including Lake Fork, where she was already living.

Get Outdoors Leadville! had already begun their own outreach in these communities, and it further picked up after an incident at Mountain View where the school bus had to pick kids up on the highway since there was so much snow left unplowed. “We started to understand there were a lot more barriers beyond access to the outdoors,” said Contreras.

Along with Full Circle and other county stakeholders, Contreras interviewed residents to hear concerns they had about their living situations such as unsafe walking conditions for kids due to missing crosswalks and discrepancies in water bills. They later helped facilitate conversations about these issues with park managers.

“When we make things easier for the groups in our community who are marginalized the most, it just levels it out for everyone else,” said Contreras.

Contreras plans to use this community organizing experience in her new role as Full Circle’s executive director, hoping to continue current programming while also addressing any remaining gaps and needs.

A trend she's seen more and more in Lake County is youth living beyond their age, similar to her own experience being the oldest and taking care of her siblings rather than living out her childhood to the fullest.

"If we can help kids and families reduce some of that stress and barriers, parents don't have to feel guilty about going to work and children can come engage in programming," said Contreras.

She's also looking forward to collaborating with other nonprofits in town in both everyday life and times of crisis. "I think that when we need to and there's a big need, we can work really well together," said Contreras. "Each organization has unique needs that deal with the fallouts of COVID-19, but the collaboration is still there."

Besides addressing bigger picture goals, Contreras said a lot of her first year as executive director will be a learning experience in writing grants, administering budgets and managing human resources tasks, but she's thankful to Cole and other Full Circle staff who have set the office up well structurally and financially.

"I'm really excited and I hope that I inspire other young women out there like me," said Contreras. "We all bring something to the table and we're all smart and capable. Hopefully someone struggling out there sees me and is inspired."