meet rebeca

Bridges Co-Founder Rebeca Romero Rainey
Twenty years ago, Bridges Project for Education was just a glimmer of an idea shared by two local women, Rebeca Romero and Pam Shepherd each knew that the Taos community could benefit from greater access to higher education. Together, they envisioned a solution. Fast forward two decades and 2,600 students, and that glimmer is a robust organization with thousands of individual success stories and a widening impact.

Rebeca has served as Chairman of the Board of Bridges since its 1997 inception. A Taos High School grad, she returned home from college to become, at 22, the youngest bank president in the country. This fall, she relinquishes her spot on the Bridges board as she and husband John Rainey move their family to Washington, D.C. Rebeca is set to begin her new job as President and CEO of The Independent Community Bankers of America, the trade association that represents all community banks in the country. Two decades at the helm of Centinela Bank and a lifelong commitment to social justice and equal opportunity have prepared her for the position.

While this job will tug her away from the region, Rebeca’s roots remain strong here in Taos. She continues to support and advocate for educational access and opportunities for Taos youth. “I knew that getting involved in education and support services for kids is what I wanted to do with my free time,” she told us, describing her motivation to collaborate with Pam and launch Bridges Project. We’re grateful for her outstanding leadership and inspiration, excited for the new chapter that’s unfolding, and happy to welcome her home whenever she returns.

A voice for Taos youth
REBECA SAYS:

"As I look at the general economic challenges that are facing our local community, part of how we foster future economic development in Taos is through the education of our youth. ... I think that the one-on-one counseling that Bridges provides is more important than ever."

By sharing information and offering individualized counseling, Bridges helps students position themselves to build skills and develop qualities that will further their personal goals as well as contribute to the economic and social health of our region.
"We still need Bridges, gosh! For so many reasons."

First-generation-to-college students benefit from more intensive counseling. Rebeca recognizes that, while parents often encourage and emotionally support their children in the pursuit of higher education, those who have not experienced it themselves may need additional help navigating the complex process. "In terms of technical knowledge and wherewithal, the process has gotten even more complicated and more expensive," she says. "And there's also a lot of options, you know, so it's complex. There's lots of decisions to be made. The one-on-one counseling that Bridges provides is more important than ever."

Traditional sources of college counseling have become less available. One of the challenges facing our public schools, Rebeca notes, is that "school counselors have had more and more put on their plate that continues to take away from what would be that traditional college counseling time." In the decades since she, herself, sought college counseling here in Taos, Rebeca has seen college counselors stretched thin across multiple demands and burdensome work loads, reducing the amount of personal attention they can direct to each student. That's where Bridges' individualized counseling becomes essential.

Parents need to be welcomed, included, and respected in the process -- whatever their views. "I think for me it's more about informing, educating and fostering awareness about what these decisions entail)... For me it's all about listening to what [parents'] concerns are." Bridges is in a unique position of being able to respectfully facilitate challenging conversations, "creating avenues for them to listen to what their children are wanting to do and how do they best meet those goals," Rebeca told us. Because Bridges participates with no specific agenda for students, it offers "a place to listen to those families... to inform, educate and support them in the process."
Engaging community

Looking into the future, Rebeca hopes that Bridges can continue to live and breathe its mission, with community support and success... and have that underlying strength and viability to continue to do good work." But she worries that the need for Bridges may not be immediately evident to all. "If, you know, they didn’t struggle, if they didn’t see kids struggling, if their kids had the resources, they came from environments where the school system really did a lot more of this, it’s hard to envision the need," she says. She urges continued outreach to share the story of Bridges and to foster a clearer understanding.

The Bridges way

Rebeca is excited about the advent of College Connections, the program Bridges launched last year to engage youth in eighth grade and support them throughout high school. "I think College Connections makes perfect sense. To see firsthand the students’ engagement with the staff, to listen to the stories, to interact with them... I think it’s just so vital." She reflects a little. After twenty dedicated years with Bridges, she’s seen plenty of challenges—and seen them overcome. Bringing College Connections to life has been a long road, but well worth the effort and persistence it took. "I think that [represents] how this organization has played out. There’s this determination, when each and every day may not be easy, to have a vision and just gradually work towards it."

That’s the Bridges way, she says. "Pure grit to just make it happen, and then to emotionally connect to it as well, and to make it more than just something to do."