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Rosendo spurs philanthropy, better communities

Loring Wirbel
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Antonio Rosendo
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Take a look at Antonio Rosendo's résumé and you'll likely notice his commitment to multiple community boards: Colorado College, Atlas Preparatory School, Downtown Development Authority, and Pikes Peak Community Foundation, among many oth



Rosendo, who is founder and partner at Spur Philanthropy and president of The Dusty and Katherine Loo Foundation, also co-founded Atlas Prep in 2008 and this year became a board member for Great Outdoors Colorado.

Rosendo would be the first to say that with children of 4 months and 6 years old at home, he had to take a break from the Colorado College Board of Trustees in the interest of domestic tranquility. But his work with both community boards and philanthropic organizations carries a common goal of modernizing community planning while bringing private investment together with effective nonprofits.

Rosendo took a tortuous path through his undergrad years to reach his concentration on philanthropy. His initial pre-med background shifted to an English major, then to a personal interest in developing educational opportunities for the disadvantaged. After undergrad studies at CC and a master's program at University of Denver, Rosendo worked in admissions at CC and as an assistant principal in Denver before developing his concept for Atlas Preparatory Academy. The ties he made while serving as a CC trustee helped Rosendo gain critical support for Atlas from former CC President Richard Celeste and from Colorado Springs civic leader Bill Hybl. Atlas' initial enrollment of 85 students has grown today to a student population of more than 1,300, serving grades K through 12.

As he expanded interests in community boards like Downtown Development Authority and the Colorado Springs Chamber & EDC, Rosendo realized his talent for bringing together private foundation money and community development resources extended beyond education. Foundations were beginning to examine a spectrum of investment covering strictly nonprofit mission-related grants, program-related investments or PRIs, and traditional investments assuming a profit return. Rosendo was interested in working with emerging hybrid models. He became CEO of both The John and Margot Lane Foundation and the Bloom Foundation. In early 2020, just before the pandemic, Rosendo and Jenny Stafford founded Spur Philanthropy, a for-profit consultancy that serves as a management framework for multiple private foundations. Currently, Spur oversees activities of Bloom, Lane and GE Johnson foundations, though the partnership is entertaining ideas for expanding the Spur management model outside El Paso County, and perhaps outside Colorado.



Rosendo said the new model of philanthropy management isn't just about bringing greater efficacy to family foundations. Most of Spur's activities are focused on building better communities through the integration of grant funding to both nonprofits and municipal agencies. Spur has spearheaded collaborative deals for creative use of Downtown space — for example, the creation of Artspace for 54 artist residences and related businesses in the former Tim Gill Center for Public Media on Costilla Street. The Downtown Development Authority acquired the property, and Spur helped the Johnson and Lane foundations contribute PRIs to the project. Ideally, a suite of projects like Artspace could create the equivalent of a master plan for cities that might be a little averse to those long-term strategies.

Rosendo talked with the *Business Journal* about breaking down silos and how to look at community investment through a different lens.

We've seen a lot of educators who want to give back to the community and provide for disadvantaged students, but you got involved in nonprofits very early in your career. Was that baked in at an early age?

I suppose it was always in my DNA to help build communities, particularly growing up and attending a low-income high school. But it wasn't a simple path that was predetermined from the start. As soon as I got interested in education, though, I made a point of looking at community growth from two perspectives: First, what can be done today, based on the resources that exist; and second, how can we examine and address the long-term systemic problems that lead to inequities and communities that are underserved or ignored. Of course, that second perspective means taking a long-term strategic view

where any progress may take years.

In the early days of Atlas, that meant trying to look at new models of classrooms that tried to optimize teacher retention, kid retention, and great schools, while minimizing preconceived notions. Sure, we looked at a lot of charter school models in developing Atlas, but I read several anti-charter-school books as well. The goals in honing the Atlas model were to not leave choices off the table for the student — college prep, two-year associate college, trade and vocational schools.



The Atlas expansion is its own success story, but are there elements of that work you've carried into your foundation work?

What Atlas taught me was to avoid silos at all costs, and look to many collaborative models. Contexts matter, people matter, and mergers of development efforts matter. I believe in the charter school model, though what that means in Colorado can be different from East or West Coast, since our charters are a little more independent.

The pandemic brought lessons to educators everywhere. The model of the public school district is all about local control, but what that meant in practice for opening schools back up after lockdown is that each district can have wildly different policies and procedures than the next district. Independence and local control are all well and good, but a common regional plan can be beneficial as well.

The role of Spur seems to be that of a virtual multi-foundation management office.

Oh, it's more physical than virtual! We actually go out into the community to look for projects where one or more foundations can collaborate with other funding sources, so our partner foundations don't passively wait for grant applications. We take care of the paperwork, the legal issues, the partnership terms, so Spur is very much the action arm of the project.

Your participation in Pikes Peak Real Estate Foundation and the Chamber & EDC indicates that you grasped the role of real estate in the development equation long before you founded Spur.

Traditionally, many philanthropic foundations have gone for the big projects like fine arts centers and zoos, all of which play important roles in the community. But it's important to think about urban residences — both standard living spaces and low-income housing — as elements of a community's vision for itself. It's not only the issue of investing in real estate in a traditional sense — it can open up space for new nonprofits as well.

"It was always in my DNA to help build communities."



Phil Lane at Lane Foundation always wanted to be in real estate, but it's been years since we've had any residential payback in the Downtown area. Blue Dot's 2015 residential development was the first new Downtown effort in decades. But now there are some 4,000 residential units existing or under development in the Downtown region. Look at how the CityGate urban renewal program became home for Weidner Field; that carries the potential of bringing 12,000 people Downtown for events.

We see the Rose Community Foundation in Denver and its use of revolving loan funds as a model for the kind of things that might be possible here. [The Transit-Oriented Development Fund is providing up to 1,000 low-income housing units along Denver light-rail lines.] Obviously, we still have a mass-transit piece of the puzzle to solve, but we could take cues from European urban master plans to design a walkable, bikeable city.

That seems to lead us to your latest board involvement with Great Outdoors Colorado.

GOCO is in this really unique space in having been created to use state lottery money to fund a variety of outdoors projects. Its structure since it was established in 1992 was to give competitive grants only to municipal entities like local governments and land trusts, and to make investments through Colorado Parks and Wildlife. It's all done for the purposes of resource conservation and stewardship of outdoor natural resources. Now, even with its structure decided by voters, there may be a way to look at nonprofits being involved in GOCO efforts in the future. But first the board has some practical things to do — like putting a permanent executive director in place.

The reason this really means a lot to me in terms of my other community activities is that I think Colorado Springs should identify itself first and foremost as something like 'the nation's premier outdoor city.' We already have that reputation, but we can enhance upon that by making outdoor recreation and preservation of outdoor resources absolutely central to our definition as a community. And again, that takes us back to the notion of breaking down silos. People involved in planning for the kind of 21st-century community we will be need to be thinking simultaneously of the collaboration between nonprofits and for-profit funding sources, of urban planning for residential and commercial land use, of the preservation of natural resources as central to our urban definition. I think this kind of debate will be central in the next mayoral race — the development of an ethos for Colorado Springs.



