

# VICENTE FOX

THE FORMER PRESIDENT  
OF MEXICO IS TURNING THE  
TIDE FOR MEXICAN YOUTH

BY DEAN NELSON

Vicente Fox wobbles slightly as he tries to keep his balance. Arms outstretched, one trademark cowboy boot placed carefully in front of the other, he is walking a tightrope.

Fox is on the ground floor of Centro Fox, the presidential library/leadership institute/community center he has developed on the grounds of a sprawling ranch that's been in his family since the late 1800s.

He looks down and pretends to lose his balance, then gets back on track. He looks straight ahead. The tightrope—it's only imaginary—stretches above the things that could keep a young person, or a country, from reaching a goal. Underneath the rope might be drugs, gangs, crime, political enemies. Fox's eyes focus forward as he speaks.

"You can't look down at what could harm you—you have to look ahead to what you could become."

Of the 200,000 visitors to Centro Fox in 2011, more than half of them were schoolchildren from rural, low-income families. Fox believes that in giving these students a vision for the future, he will be able to develop the next generation of leaders for his country.

"These students will never hear the message from their families that they can accomplish big things," he says. "Mostly they will hear [that] the best they can expect is to become migrants, or work in construction. Someone has to tell them, and this is what I'm trying to do, 'Look here, kid! You could be president of Mexico! You could be an architect! You could be a violin player or whatever you want.'"

Fox himself came from a position of privilege. His family owned the ranch where he grew up, and they employed many of the people in the village. He went to a prestigious university in Mexico City, began working for Coca-Cola as a truck driver and eventually became president of Coca-Cola Mexico by age 32.

A 10-year college reunion turned his life toward politics, however. He and his former classmates gathered to catch up, and at the peak of their bragging, their favorite professor, Father Scheifler, called for their attention.

"He thanked us for inviting him to the dinner and said he was pleased to be with us, but then he paused," Fox says. "He said: 'I feel very sad and sorrowful tonight. I think I failed in my teaching and my education with you. I tried to teach you to live for others and not for yourselves, to promote opportunities for others and not just enriching yourselves. I am disappointed. I am not going to stay for dinner with you. Good night.'"

Over the next months, Fox studied Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, a self-absorbed man who, at the age of 30, was wounded in battle. During the long, painful rehabilitation, Ignatius had a spiritual revelation that propelled him into serving and educating others.\*


The combination of Father Scheifler's denunciation and the life of Ignatius made Fox rethink his goals for his life. He saw how frustrating it was for the people in his country living under an authoritarian government that was not defeating poverty but was hoarding wealth and wasting the potential of its citizens.

"[Ignatius'] cause became living for others and not himself. That was my inspiration," Fox says. "That is the cause that moves me in life. It's what makes me passionate, compassionate, dedicated and effective."

Fox's legacy as a president is that he broke the authoritarian rule of the party that had dominated for more than 70 years and brought greater accountability and economic stability to the country. He didn't do

everything he set out to do, but he's not finished, either. He meets regularly with the current Mexican president, Felipe Calderón, to discuss a variety of issues, including the growing influence of the drug cartels and the country's border issues with both the United States and Guatemala. He also meets with law enforcement officials from around the world to help reform Mexico's judiciary and border security. He has been an outspoken critic of drug consumption in the United States and of the border wall constructed by the United States between San Diego and Tijuana. He may no longer be president, but he is driven toward helping his country.

In a letter to several pastors who met with him during his presidency, Fox wrote about his dream for the Fox Center that went beyond just economic development and the spread of democratic values. "I don't want to just teach methods and history, or just provide research tools, although those are important," he wrote. "I am also interested in the holistic development of these future leaders."

Stepping off his imaginary tightrope, Fox opens his hands and gestures broadly. "We're all leaders," he says. "We just don't go within ourselves to learn [why] we are in this life—what our purpose is. We can exercise leadership in every place we are and in any activity we're participating in, whether it's family, school, sports, work or politics. Everyone can be a leader in something. Our kids need to discover that." 

DEAN NELSON is the author of *Quantum Leap: How John Polkinghorne Found God in Science and Religion*.