

The Fantastic Mr. Fox

The former President of Mexico looks to San Diego for help in fixing his country

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Vicente Fox

Vicente Fox and his classmates wanted their 10-year college reunion to be something they'd never forget. They rented the University Club in Mexico City, one of the swankiest rooms in the city; they made sure the food was exquisite, the liquor plentiful, the cigars imported, and the women beautiful. They wanted to remember this reunion for one thing in particular: They wanted to impress each other.

Some of the classmates were bankers, some were presidents of manufacturing companies, some were CEOs. This was the nation's elite—including Fox. He was president of Coca-Cola in Mexico, at the ripe young age of 32. It was a night for bragging.

They had attended Iberoamericana University in Mexico City, a school run by the Jesuit Order of the Catholic Church, and they invited their main professor, Father Schiefler, to help them congratulate themselves. Schiefler mingled with the newly enriched graduates, watched as they preened in front of each other like so many peacocks, and then called for their attention. The classmates became quiet, in anticipation of the praise that would follow. What the priest said changed Fox forever.

"He thanked us for inviting him to the dinner and said he was pleased to be with us, but then he paused," Fox said. "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.'"

Schiefler left the party, and the crowd stood in stunned silence. Fox said they felt ashamed of themselves and did the next best thing.

"We all got drunk," he said.

But he got the message, and began thinking about what he had learned in college. He had studied Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits. He remembered that Ignatius was quite self-absorbed, much like Fox's graduating class. The Catholic Encyclopedia describes Ignatius as a man "affected and extravagant about his hair and dress, consumed with the desire of winning glory." At the age of 30, Ignatius was wounded in battle and, during a long, painful rehabilitation, had a spiritual revelation that propelled him into serving and educating others.



Library, Fox Center

Soon after the university reunion, Fox left Coca-Cola. While he acknowledges that Coke was generating wealth and jobs for people who needed them, Fox felt that he needed to be doing more than selling sugar water. He went back to his family's ranch in San Cristóbal, in the state of Guanajuato, and worked in the family business raising cattle and broccoli for 15 years. But that wasn't enough either.

"When I was invited to get into politics, I remembered the words of Father Schiefler," Fox said, "and I thought maybe this was it." Fox and much of the rest of the country were frustrated with Mexico's corrupt leadership, expanding poverty, and the lack of direction. Fox became mayor, then governor, and in 2000, became Mexico's first democratically elected president in more than 70 years.

His legacy as president is that of the plain-speaking bullfighter, rancher, and business executive. He wore cowboy boots and big belt buckles, and turned his country toward democracy and accountability. The country became stable economically, and was more attractive to businesses that needed a manufacturing base. But during his presidency, and much more so after his term ended in 2006, violence and fear escalated as drug cartels gained influence and confidence. He still feels responsible for fixing his country's problems.

Recently he invited leaders of two San Diego entities to visit the family ranch in San Cristóbal near Leon to see if ideas that are working north of the border could also work in his country. One of those leaders was Chris Yanov, the founder and president of Reality Changers, a nonprofit organization based in City Heights. Reality Changers helps high school students prepare application materials so that they can be the first in their families to go to college. Founded in 2001, Reality Changers has helped hundreds of local high school students attend and graduate from college in four years. Another 250 are in the program right now. The group got the former president's attention when Fox was in San Diego in April 2011. Now he wants Reality Changers to do something similar in Mexico on a much larger scale.

"The message of Reality Changers can be true in Mexico, too," Fox said at the hacienda where he grew up. Sitting at the same breakfast table where he ate as a little boy, he pictured himself speaking to all the children of Mexico. "Reality Changers goes directly to people and says, 'Look at your life. Wouldn't you like to try something different? Wouldn't you like to be a successful football player instead of a gang member, or swim for your country in the Olympics? Wouldn't you like to have a scholarship to college? We can make that reality come to you.' That is the message we want to deliver on a massive level. We want to connect with every single kid who is working for the cartels. We have to do something."

Yanov was instantly receptive to Fox's idea of creating something like Reality Changers, Mexico-style.

"When a head of state asks us to put a program together in his country, that's a great stamp of approval," he said. "If they wanted to run a program like ours, they could."

Yanov and other Reality Changers staff will visit with Fox again in Mexico in January to develop a specific strategy.

"Working with President Fox is making my job easier," Yanov said. "He wants us to connect with kids who are involved in drug cartels in Mexico. That makes dealing with kids in City Heights a breeze!"

Charles Pope of the Trans-Border Institute at the University of San Diego also met with Fox, to plan conferences and workshops on law enforcement, security, and community development along the U.S./Mexico border. While they spent much of their time discussing drug-related violence in Mexico and its possible solutions, they also began planning for a summit in conjunction with a major university in Mexico to discuss law enforcement and Mexico's judicial system. Pope also asked Fox to be part of the TBI's advisory board, which would mean regular visits to San Diego.

"It would be great if the Trans-Border Institute could serve as a resource to help the president keep his policy ideas moving forward," Pope said. "And his involvement with our institute would give us a great deal of insight in how our countries can work together to improve our region."

Both Reality Changers and the Trans-Border Institute are working with what Fox started soon after his presidency ended. The Fox Center, or Centro Fox, is a combination presidential library/community center/leadership institute, all on the property that has been his family's ranch for more than 100 years. The old walls from the historic cattle ranch are blended with modern architecture. It has his presidential papers archived electronically for researchers, along with displays of significant events during his presidency, ornate saddles given to him by world leaders, replicas of his presidential office and cabinet meeting room, a gallery that exhibits local artists' work, open space for concerts and dance (Elton John and Carlos Santana appeared there recently for fund raisers), and banners from the ceiling with portraits of himself along with his heroes, Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King Jr., Lech Walesa, and Marie Curie.



Christopher Yanov, Guanajato, GTO

But most important to Fox is the center's efforts to train young people who he hopes will become the next generation of leaders in Mexico. Thousands of Mexican children visit Centro Fox each month, where they can learn about government, public service, and even be president or a cabinet member for a day. More than 200,000 visitors came to the center in 2011.

"There is a huge empty space we have to fill in our country," he said. "After high school there aren't very many options for our young people. They can go to work for the drug cartels or they can migrate. How do you keep them in school with the amount of poverty and lack of jobs we have? That's a problem."

Fox is working with community colleges in Guanajuato as well as the local major university to train people for jobs in the area, which means businesses must also emerge to provide those jobs. But it will take more than jobs and education, according to Fox's wife, Marta, who is a partner with him on these efforts.

"Part of the problem is that we have to change the way people think," she said. "For much of our history, people got used to asking government to give us everything—food, education, money. We're not that kind of country anymore."

Vicente Fox is convinced that developing leaders is the key to Mexico's future.

The Center brings in more than 100,000 young people every year from rural, low-income communities and families. "They will never hear the message from their families that they can accomplish big things," Fox said. "Mostly they will hear that the best they can expect is to become migrants, or that they will work in construction or harvesting fields. Someone has to tell them, and this is what I'm trying to do at Centro Fox, 'Look here, kid! You could be president of Mexico! You could be an architect. You could be a violin player or whatever you want.' "



Unam Entrance

Fox recognizes that he got as far as he did in business and politics because he was given opportunities to do so. But others who worked on his family's ranch left to find jobs in the United States. As he got older he began to respect people willing to leave their homes, families, and land "to eat hot dogs instead of the rich enchiladas here," he said. "That's when I first began to understand the courage and commitment of migrants looking for a better life."

The vision of his childhood friends leaving the country still motivates him.

“People are willing to do great things, but the opportunities are not there,” he said. “We have to nourish our leadership with that power we have within so we can accomplish big things in life.”

The “power within” is a theme Fox returns to in almost every conversation. Those whose portraits are on banners in Centro Fox all had a power within themselves, which gave them the strength to overcome great obstacles, he says.

Fox connects with his own inner power, spending at least five minutes per day in silence, considering two basic questions: Who am I? What purpose do I have in this life?

But mostly he is trying to develop Centro Fox as a means to bring about long-term changes in Mexico. He thinks his country could take the approach that Reality Changers takes with prospective college students. In the ground floor of Centro Fox, among the research stations, heroic banners, presidential medals, and opulent saddles, he stretches out his arms and begins to walk along an imaginary tightrope, carefully placing one cowboy boot in front of the other, looking straight ahead.

“Reality Changers gives a kid a vision for what he could become, and places that vision out in front of him—college, a job, role models,” Fox says, slowly walking forward, arms outstretched, swaying slightly.

The imaginary tightrope stretches above the things that could keep the person from reaching his or her goal, such as drugs, gangs, and crime. Fox looks straight ahead.

“If you tell the kid not to look down, not to do drugs, not to join a gang, then of course he’s going to look down.” Fox looks down and pretends to stumble and fall off the rope. “But you can’t look down at what could harm you—you have to look ahead to what you could become,” he says.

Facing forward, arms outstretched, he is still trying to become the person Father Schiefler had in mind.

At a dinner late in the evening, at the hacienda, representatives from the Trans- Border Institute, Reality Changers, and Centro Fox talked about the day’s events and their time with Marta and Vicente Fox. They sat at an outside table under a high canvas canopy. The discussion was lively and full of promise for how these organizations could collaborate and give the next generation of Mexican leadership a vision for the future. But their conversation was repeatedly interrupted by a loud buzzing sound overhead—like a small fan’s propeller starting and stopping. Finally, someone turned a light upward to see what was causing the commotion.

A hummingbird was trying to escape the canopy, but it kept striking the roof, its wings beating furiously against the fabric. It would drop a few feet, search the overhang for an alternative, then rise again, frustrated and trapped. The people around the table observed the scene for several seconds, shook their heads and returned to their conversation about what they had accomplished. They hoped the clueless bird would eventually figure it out or, exhausted, give up, and stop interrupting. Quietly, Yanov of Reality Changers left the table and came back with a long pole.

He gently raised the pole alongside the bird, which grabbed on for a few seconds. When Yanov slowly began lowering the pole, the bird let go and continued rattling against the ceiling. After several attempts, and ignoring the advice from the others around the table to give up, Yanov finally got the hummingbird to hold on for a longer time. He lowered the pole until it was below the wall of the canopy. When the hummingbird saw the open sky above, it silently flew up and away.

Neighborly Advice:

Fox is exercising the freedom of being a former president, with some of his more provocative statements aimed at the United States. The drug-related violence in Mexico is a direct result of demand and consumption of illegal drugs in the U.S., he says. The answer is not more military intervention in Mexico, he says, but in legalizing drugs in the U.S.

“Sex, alcohol, tobacco are all legal, so the last frontier is drugs,” he said. “I’m not saying everyone should go take drugs—there are moral and ethical reasons for not doing drugs. I’m saying why should parents and citizens expect government to keep their kids from taking drugs?”

The immigration debate in the U.S. is also misguided, he says. Building a wall along the border and passing laws like those in Arizona and Alabama are actions that ignore the reality of how the United States is changing, he says.

"I'm not calling for open borders. I'm calling for recognition of the great asset of migration. Who is going to take care of the old and retired in the U.S.? Who is going to provide the pension plans if not the new people coming to work? And the U.S. should be looking at Mexico as an economic partner, not a competitor, he says.

"Obama thinks it weakens the U.S. economy if the Ford Motor Company puts a factory in Mexico," Fox said. "He's absolutely wrong. Either Ford becomes competitive or they disappear. Asia is taking over economic leadership of the world, and we could be much stronger if we worked together."