

# 'One of city's greatest community leaders' saying goodbye

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**G**onzalo Arroyo, the retiring director of Family Focus Aurora, is known for many things. Friends and colleagues speak highly of his ability to build teams, advocate for his community and navigate the complex web of U.S.-Mexico relations.

They praise his passion for education, his humility and his dedication to helping others succeed, whether they're on his staff, in preschool or trying to earn a GED. His ability to set goals and go after them wholeheartedly has left an indelible impression on the many people who've worked with him over the years.

Aurora Mayor Tom Weisner issued a proclamation in Arroyo's honor this week that pointed to Arroyo's work in transforming Family Focus Aurora into a trusted resource and hub for Aurora's immigrant community. Weisner said Arroyo was "one of the city's greatest community leaders and advocates."

Many note the fondness Arroyo has for his "two hometowns" of Aurora and San Miguel Epejan, a city in the central Mexican state of Michoacán that Arroyo left in 1980 at 25 to come to Aurora for education and work.

"He's proud of who he is and where he came from," said Frank Navarro, who met Arroyo when the two played on an Aurora soccer team as young men. They now work together on a program run by Family Focus and the Department of Children and Family Services that educates parents and helps youth develop life skills.

After 17 years at the helm of Family Focus Aurora, Arroyo, 59, is retiring from the nonprofit to pursue a new project: working to start an organization in San Miguel Epejan that, much like Family Focus, will offer programs to support families there. It's a goal he's been talking about for the last two to three years, he said.

"I'm ready to do what I wanted to do," he said. "This is the time."

Arroyo will be splitting his time between Aurora and Mexico in the coming months, he said, but will eventually spend much of his time in Mexico to get his organization up and running.

As he empties his filing cabinets and reminisces with the numerous visitors who've stopped by his office on Second Avenue ahead of his last day at Family Focus on Friday, Arroyo has been reflecting on his personal history.

As a young undocumented immigrant — he's since obtained his U.S. citizenship — Arroyo worked hard under the tutelage of his mentor, an East Aurora High School teacher, to learn English. He eventually went to Waubensee Community College for several years, obtaining high grades that helped him earn a

scholarship to North Central College, where he went on to receive his bachelor's and master's degrees.

He'd later serve on the East Aurora School Board, oversee youth programs and community outreach at Waubensee Community College and help raise money to fund projects in his home state in Mexico.

"I'm very persistent and when I get something in my mind, I keep coming back," Arroyo said.

During his time at Family Focus Aurora, he's had many accomplishments, including expanding the adult education program that helps people learning English obtain GEDs and starting the Roots Aurora festival. He's overseen programs that help immigrants and offer after-school programming to East Aurora students, including help with homework, college visits and sports and arts.

Arroyo said his work at Family Focus was more than a job — it was a lifestyle that required listening to the community he was serving and being a part of it. He drew on his own personal experience to help others as they worked to achieve their own goals.

"If somebody has gone through something, that means you can do it too," he often told people.

Arroyo's departure is coming at a financially difficult time for Family Focus, which is based in Chicago and has seven centers throughout the region.

In a Feb. 6 letter to the Aurora center staff, the head of the nonprofit said the organization would be making changes to "attain financial sustainability and stability as soon as possible" after three years of operating at a financial loss.

The nonprofit will no longer have directors overseeing individual centers, opting instead to have regional vice presidents who will oversee a handful of centers, with a supervisor on site to manage day-to-day operations.

Merri Ex, Family Focus' president and CEO, said Wednesday in an interview that dwindling state support had put the nonprofit in a tough financial spot. The nonprofit sometimes relies on a line of credit to cover budget shortfalls.

Ex said she didn't let Arroyo go, nor any other director — though some will have new roles — but going forward the organization will have a different administrative structure. She's also working to increase the nonprofit's endowment, start a major gifts program and plans to ask members of the nonprofit's board of directors for larger annual contributions to bring in more revenue.

Arroyo said leaving Family Focus will be bittersweet but he feels ready for a new challenge. For quite some time, he said, he's been working with Family Focus Aurora staff to prepare them to take on leadership roles when he leaves.

Arroyo said he's in the process of mapping the needs of San Miguel Epejan and is working with a university in the capital of Michoacán, as well as Mexican citizens who are living abroad, to get recommendations about what services the community most needs. He plans to seek support for the new nonprofit from private donations, as well as volunteers who want to help.

"I don't say this is the end," he said. "It's just the beginning of something I've been eager to take on."

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