

SFWS TODAY: School Leadership

GERSON PÉREZ CARDOZA TAKES THE HELM AS THE NEW SFWS ADMINISTRATOR

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After years of helping the Waldorf educational movement grow in Mexico and Guatemala, Gerson Pérez Cardoza has come to New Mexico to help lead the Santa Fe Waldorf School to its next level of development.

A native of Guatemala, Pérez was educated as an engineer and moved to Mexico to get his MBA at the Instituto Panamericano de Alta Dirección de Empresa in Mexico City, one of the top business schools in Mexico.

He discovered Waldorf after the birth of his daughter Alejandra, now a rising Grade 8 SFWS student, and became a co-founder, administrator and grades teacher at the Niño Mágico Waldorf School in Guadalajara from 2008 to 2016.

This precise combination of expertise in both Waldorf and business is what sealed the deal for the administrators, teachers, board members and parents of the SFWS Search Committee. “We felt that Gerson’s background in founding, managing and teaching at a Waldorf school, his knowledge of the Waldorf pedagogy and anthroposophy, along with his experience in business consulting were the right qualifications our needs,” notes Board of Trustees President Melissa Coleman.

Below, Pérez reflects on his journey to Santa Fe and his vision for our school:

Why did you leave the business world to become an educator?

When I was a young adult, I identified my personal mission as helping people achieve positive, long-lasting, and profound changes in their lives. And that was what I devoted myself to achieve as a business consultant. When you dive deeply, most conflicts in an organization come from a lack of clarity about how things should be done. I decided to help businesses improve their processes and controls, and thereby help people live happier and more successful lives in their work.

Soon I realized I wasn’t making the kind of impact I was looking to achieve. By that time in my life, I became the father of a beautiful and vivacious baby girl, who kindled a spark for me to search for the best possible education I could offer her. I always say that my daughter was the spark but not the final reason that we founded the school. When I discovered Waldorf Education, I started an important shift in my personal mission and gradually decided to devote myself to making Waldorf education available to as many children as possible in Guadalajara, where I lived at the time.

Why Waldorf specifically?

I remember the first few things I learned about Waldorf education. Somehow, everything just seemed to be so right! As a former teaching mentor later said, "Sometimes, when a person discovers Waldorf education, it is like love at first sight. You really don't know much about it; you just feel it's right."

Waldorf seems to answer to an inner longing from our souls, a longing to gradually meet the world around us and integrate it into ourselves with joy. To do this, instead of just answering the question of what a child needs to learn to be successful in life, the Waldorf approach answers the question of what kind of person do we want to be in order to transform our society. Waldorf Education not only prepares children for their future, but also manages to develop their full potential as human beings.

What attracted you to Santa Fe and to this Waldorf school?

I have worked with Waldorf schools in Mexico and Guatemala. The schools I worked for were in their first development stages, in their first septennial if I may use a very common concept in biographical work in anthroposophy. Very few Waldorf schools in Mexico, and none in Guatemala go all the way up to high school. I have always wondered what a mature school would be like and I wanted to witness the impact this kind of school has on a child completing the journey from pre-K to 12th grade. As we all know, there are no coincidences, and in my search of such an opportunity, I found that opportunity in the school's search for an administrator!

What strikes you about our school so far?

The most remarkable characteristic I have found in this community is the high level of commitment that everybody has. Teachers, staff, and board members alike all walk the extra mile to make sure children have the best possible learning experience, every day.

I am also very excited to see how far the school has come. The community has achieved a lot and made a big impact on many children over many years. There is a solid foundation, a solid structure and a solid understanding of how to teach the education every day and in every class.

How do you plan to approach your first year here?

Before I get caught up in the "minutia" usually associated with administrative positions, I want to establish a connection with the different "actors" of the school at a human level.

I want to know who they are, what motivates them, what disappoints them, their needs, their wishes, their concerns, and so on. I want to listen to the individuals and the groups.

Using that knowledge, I will help the school “read” the vision it has of itself to then revisit the strategic planning process and to make sure this plan includes all the critical factors it should include to make sure our community is going in the right direction to achieve our vision.

The school is experiencing a solid boost in enrollment, and is looking to expand its campus, curriculum and community presence. How do you see yourself helping those efforts and where would you like to see the school in ten years?

In a similar way to what happens with a child, growth happens in different stages. In each stage, there is an identifiable impulse. There are moments to grow in height, and there are moments to add weight or fill out. In the last 35 years, the school has gone through different stages, and we can say that now it has reached most of its height, offering programs that go from pre-K all the way up to high school. There are still a lot of opportunities for the school to fill out, and it is there where the school will need to focus its efforts and attention.

I want to foster the appropriate kind of leadership that keeps the school growing inwardly. In ten years, I want the school to be acknowledged, not only for being a place where children fulfill their true potential as human beings, but also for being a great place for the adults to work and collaborate.

What do you do for fun, to refresh yourself?

I find joy in the simple things of life, like taking a long walk in a Sunday dawn, just observing the perfect beauty of nature. A few minutes devoted to meditation help me keep my mind opened to the wisdom there is in the people I meet during the day.

What would people be surprised to know about you?

I think people may be surprised to know that my first job when I moved to America, was as a caregiver for seniors with Alzheimer's disease and dementia in a memory care facility in Houston, Texas.

I would say being a caregiver for the elderly is the equivalent of teaching children, in that you are helping both prepare for the next big step in their journey. In the case of children, it is adulthood, and in the case of the elderly, it is leaving the physical world. In both cases, it is a life-changing experience. Serving people who are in the final stage of

their journey in the world gave me a unique opportunity to deepen my personal understanding of the different elements that integrate the human being and let me “paint” a whole picture of life.