



The Sierra Era Draws to a Close

by Stewart Dale Spencer

After almost four decades as the executive director of the San Marcos Housing Authority, Albert Sierra is retiring. His last official day will be December 31. I visited with him recently to talk about his career. He was raised in South Texas, graduating from Cotulla High School in 1965. He came to Southwest Texas State College, as it was known at that time, in September of that year. He graduated in 1969. He went to work for the Urban Renewal program in San Marcos just before the flood of 1970. He was working on acquiring properties for various reasons including flood control, road construction, and removing blight and slum. In 1973 he became the Director of the local Urban Renewal program. Two years later, he was promoted to Director of the City's Community



Development Block Grant (CDBG) program and held that position until 1978. Part of his job was to close out the old Urban Renewal program. He told me that his office was one of the first to be moved into what was then a brand-new City Hall building on Hopkins Street. He moved on to become the Community Services Director from 1978 to 1981. In that role, he oversaw the Urban Renewal program, the Library, Parks and Recreation, Animal Control, the Airport, the Health Department, and WIC. In 1977 he served as the Acting City Manager for five months and again in 1978. He said that at that time, the population of San Marcos was less than 25,000.

In July 1981, Sierra was selected to be the new director of the Housing Authority. He said that his number one challenge was to prevent the Housing Authority from going into HUD receivership because of its poor financial standing at the time. The City also asked him to complete some projects in the CDBG program. This included extending the C. M. Allen Parkway, acquiring the land for what is now Rio Vista Park, and acquiring and clearing land for the old Police Department building. He also oversaw acquiring land for the Juan Veramendi Plaza. At the same time, land on the other two corners of the Hopkins/C. M. Allen intersection was acquired and sold for redevelopment.

Sierra said that in 1970, the Allen Woods Homes flooded just six months after they were built but that the flooding had not been too bad. One of the challenges he faced in his early years at the Housing Authority was the need to mitigate some of the flooding in that area. The drainage systems that were put in place as a result seem to have done their job. He was also part of the Upper San Marcos River Watershed board and was involved in the construction of the flood control dams that have greatly reduced the severity and frequency of floods in San Marcos.

Sierra said that over the years he had volunteered at several community organizations. At one point he was on the Hays County Women's Shelter board, which made it possible for that organization to open their first office at the Chapultepec Homes. (See the interview with Elva Gonzalez in the [September 2015](#) issue of the Oracle on our website.) Sierra has

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ALLEN WOODS HOMES — PODER LEARNING CENTER

Get this Party Started

Our teens know how to party and how to throw one! Teen Night challenged the teens to plan a party for the seniors at Springtown Villa for next month's Teen Night. Working in teams, they had one hour to decorate in holiday theme, come up with games and activities, food, and a schedule for the party. We look forward to next month when the teens will put their ideas into action!



Celebrating Children's Day

Texas State Recreation students Kailie Gannon, Braeden Fuller, Caitlin Cooper, David Smith, and Aileen Camarillo brought *Universal Children's Day* to PODER. Games included face painting, crafts, a photo booth, and "European Garbage Ball." (We think the students made up the name.) In this game, players can take only three steps forward and then must pass the ball.

The goals are two trash cans on opposite sides of the room. There was also a raffle for two HEB fruit and snack baskets and two Kobe's Steak House gift cards. Ana Reyna was one of the winners. All the kids were given swag bags filled with healthy information and goodies. Thank you to HEB and Kobe's for their generous contribution to a successful event!



Healthy Eating Habits

Allen Woods senior residents were given the opportunity to learn how to create a healthy breakfast with Kate Blankenship from Texas AgriLife Extension. She talked about food preparation safety and ideas for a healthy breakfast. Kate will be coming the first Wednesday of every month to conduct a Senior Nutrition Class. Each class will have a short discussion and cooking lesson!



Springtown Villa

TRICK-OR-TREATERS TAKE OVER SPRINGTOWN



On Halloween, the kids from the after-school program at the PODER Learning Center in Allen Woods came to Springtown Villa to trick-or-treat. The kids went around to residents' doors and

collected candy from them. This event allowed residents the chance to participate in Halloween festivities and worked to bridge the generational gap. Residents enjoyed seeing the kids dressed up and the kids were happy to be trick-or-treating. About half of the doors were decorated and a few folks even dressed up in Halloween costumes.

Resident Council: 12/4 & 12/18

December Events:

Health Fair

Dec. 2 @ 2 PM

Budgeting Class

Dec. 12 @ 2PM

Building Ginger Bread Houses

Dec. 20 @ 9 AM

Christmas Party

Dec. 23 @ 12 PM



MEET ONE OF OUR NEW RESIDENTS

Tina Jacinto moved into Springtown Villa in October. This is actually not her first time at Springtown She lived

here about 10 years ago. In her spare time, she likes loom knitting, attending events in the community room, and hosting company. Her favorite movies are Westerns, especially those starring John Wayne. Please give her a warm welcome back to Springtown!



Meet Springtown's Santa, Alan Baker. He enjoys volunteering his time during the holidays to act as Santa. He goes to nursing homes, schools, movie theaters, and more. One of his favorite things about acting as Santa Clause is getting to see the kids faces light up when they see him.

C. M. ALLEN HOMES — KAD KORNER STORE



During the Austin Attorney General Underage Drinking Program presentation to our teens, Kevin Sanchez tries to walk in a straight line while wearing the Drunk Buster goggles. He soon realized it was impossible! Thank you for an amazing presentation. Our teens greatly appreciate it!



We are extremely proud of these two KAD members. Bryan Dominquez (on the left) and Abel Rodriquez enrolled in the ROTC program at San Marcos High School. Keep up the good work!



We want to give Mr. Albert Sierra a special Thank You for his continued support at all of the different events for both adults and children. Pictured above, he visits our residents at an event hosted at KAD. We will greatly miss him. Happy Retirement!



Rose Berglund, from the Texas State Department of Health and Human Performance, spent time with our after-school children. She read to the children and then she held a dance session. Everyone enjoyed the amazing activities! A HUGE Thank You from us!!!!



CHAPULTEPEC HOMES & ADULT LEARNING CENTER



We would like to announce the much anticipated arrival of our newest residents. Kristine Stewart and Roderick Lott welcomed TWO beautiful boys. Roderick James (R.J.) & Luther James (L.J.) made their grand appearance on November 26. Welcome to the family!

Junior Master Gardener Club Represents the Chapultepec Family in Veterans Day Parade

At Chapultepec, we have ten children that have at least one member of their family that is, or has been, a member of the Armed Forces. The kids from Chapultepec know how to show up and represent. They not only set aside time to walk the parade on a Saturday morning but they also raised the money needed to purchase their shirts. Behind all of our wonderful kids are even more amazing parents that are doing their best to instill the values of hard work and dedication in their children. We are proud of all of the wonderful things happening here at Chapultepec.



Our littlest residents are making the biggest impact. Chapultepec is home to the Mambas, one of the teams of the San Marcos Indoor Soccer League. Coach Alyssa Gutierrez put together the team of 4 year olds from Chapultepec. They are out there working hard and having lots of fun. Even though they lost their first game, they came out fighting. We would all love for you to come out to their games and support them as they continue to pursue victory.

Sierra (continued from page 1) also served on the boards of Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), the Twin Valley Boy Scout District, the Lions Club, the Rotary Club, the Pan-Am Golf Association, and is a charter member of the local LULAC Council #654.

I asked what he thought was his greatest success. He said it was the improvements made to the financial foundation and physical condition of public housing in San Marcos. Six units at Chapultepec were converted to become the home of Head Start. Sierra got grants that made it possible to renovate and improve the Porter Homes in 1989, do a major renovation of the Chapultepec Homes beginning in 1991, and make improvements to the C. M. Allen Homes and the Allen Woods Homes. Due to the lack of funding, the last public housing units to be added to the community were the 26 single-family homes that are scattered throughout town. A new office was built at C. M. Allen. The old office and community space became the home of Kids Against Drugs (KAD) and other Resident Services operations. The PODER Learning Center was established at Allen Woods, along with a new Maintenance building.

Sierra is especially proud of what has been accomplished at Chapultepec. When I was new at the SMHA, just before the renovation work began, Sierra told me he wanted to take the opportunity to create some kind of self-sufficiency program and get HUD approval to set Chapultepec aside for that purpose. Right after that, HUD announced the creation of the Family Self-Sufficiency program and we started working to build support in the community to make it happen.



SMHA senior staff (Albert Hernandez, Stewart Spencer, Gene Martin, Albert Sierra, and Lana Wagner) were organizing the response to the 2015 flood. Sierra also met with every family, working out of KAD twelve hours a day for two weeks straight.

He said his worst experience was the Memorial Day Weekend Flood in 2015. He is still working on finalizing the assistance from the CDBG Disaster Relief program so that the Housing Authority is reimbursed for some of the costs of the repairs. I find it interesting that he began his career at the Housing Authority, working extensively with CDBG, and that he is ending his career being knee-deep in CDBG requirements again.

Sierra was very happy that during his tenure, we have been able to provide so many services to our residents, especially the kids. We talked about how gratifying it is to have kids come back as successful adults and tell us how our after-school programs had made such a difference in their lives.

I asked him what he would do differently if he had the opportunity. He said he wished he had been able to create more housing for low income families. HUD limited us to what we have today. He said there is inadequate financing available to build housing that can be profitable on its own. He is pleased that the Housing Authority is now working on projects to increase the number of affordable housing units through the Low Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) program. It is not as affordable as public housing, where rent is directly tied to income, but it helps. The recent creation of a *public facility corporation* will help support public housing activities such as acquisition, construction, rehabilitation, equipment, etc.

I asked about funny moments in the past. He said that at one of the National Night Out events there was a moonwalk bounce house. He said he likes playing with the kids and he crawled into it but ripped his pants in the process. Fortunately, no one saw it and he was able to get out of that situation discreetly. He recalled that during one of the Halloween Haunted House events, his granddaughter, and a friend of hers who lived at Allen Woods, ran out of the spook house because they were scared. Nevertheless, after a short time, they wanted to try it again.

He talked about a longtime resident who bequeathed a lot of beautiful plants to the Housing Authority. Most of them were inside the main building for several years and some

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Sierra (continued from page 6) still remain in the patio area. He said he had good memories of many families. He talked about how emotionally hard it was to terminate housing assistance for lease violations. Over the years, he would sometimes encounter those persons around town. There have been a few who blame him personally but most have not held grudges, realizing that he had to apply the rules equally.

I asked him what he saw in the future of the Housing Authority. He said he expected that the Housing Authority would continue to upgrade properties and expand services. He said that the revenue from the establishment of the new LIHTC properties would help make this possible. He thinks it is important to preserve the public housing inventory because it makes it possible for very low income families to have a decent place to live. He said that in the past, City administrators always said that it was not their business to provide such housing and left that to the Housing Authority. He feels that the current City Council is more amenable to being a partner in this process. He thinks that when it comes to addressing the need for decent housing for all families, we are on the right track – not just in San Marcos but in the whole country. He said we cannot do it on our own.

I asked Sierra if he had any advice for his successor. He said that person should try to maintain the facilities and the programs for our residents, striving to create exemplary communities. He recommends being fair but firm when enforcing the rules of the lease. He says we should work hard to provide families with a decent place they can call home.

I asked Sierra about his plans for the immediate future. He said he plans to be involved in the community and mentioned several organizations with which he wants to be more personally involved, such as Meals on Wheels and Habitat for Humanity. He said he does not expect to change his current vacation and travel habits. He said that he and his wife, Becky Sierra, have been taking one or two trips abroad each year. They are planning a trip to Ireland, England, and Scotland.

Sierra said the Housing Authority has been blessed with many good, long-term employees. He said he could not take full credit for all of the accomplishments because the people around him made a difference. This included maintenance workers, site managers, administrative staff, resident services personnel, interns, and our community partners.

He talked about when he was making plans for the renovation of the Chapultepec Homes. There were some companies that specialized in building public housing and had ideas of how it should look. He selected Austin architect Gus Vozell, who had never done a public housing project, to design the new look. Sierra said they wanted to do everything possible, within the budget, to make Chapultepec look like a nice place to live. He knew he had achieved that goal when a friend who lives on McKie Street told him, “Albert, that looks like the Holiday Inn.”

We reminisced about the days when public housing was not allowed to have air-conditioning. We had to fight with HUD to change the rules to allow us to spend public money to install central heat and air conditioning systems. Mayor Kathy Morris, who had worked with Sierra back in his Urban Renewal days, helped by soliciting the support of Henry Cisneros, former mayor of San Antonio, who was the Secretary of HUD at that time.

Sierra said, “There are so many individuals to thank who supported the endeavors of the San Marcos Housing Authority and for them I’m grateful. We’ve been truly blessed.”



Along with the change of seasons, Chapultepec is seeing its next repair project. Sidewalks are being replaced, where needed. Soon, the top of that spire will be cleaned and repainted.



December 2019



Sun

Mon

Tue

Wed

Thu

Fri

Sat

1	2	3 <i>Money Management</i> <i>KAD @ 1:30 pm</i>	4	5 <i>FSS Class</i> <i>Self-Defense</i> <i>CALC @ 6 pm</i>	6	7
8	9	10 <i>Board of Commissioners</i> <i>5:30 pm</i>	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18 <i>SMHA OFFICES</i> <i>CLOSE @ 3 pm</i>	19 <i>Food Wise</i> <i>Cooking Class</i> <i>CALC @ 6 pm</i>	20	21
22	23	24 <i>SMHA OFFICES</i> <i>CLOSED</i>	25 <i>SMHA OFFICES</i> <i>CLOSED</i>	26	27	28
29	30	31 <i>SMHA OFFICES</i> <i>CLOSE @ 2 pm</i>	Jan 1 <i>SMHA OFFICES</i> <i>CLOSED</i>	December got its name from the Latin word "decem" (ten) because it was the tenth month in ancient Roman calendar. The winter days following December were not included as part of any month. The calendar began in March. We should go back to that.		

LEADERSHIP

Board of Commissioners

Richard Cruz — Chairperson
 Rose Brooks — Vice-Chairperson
 vacant — Resident Commissioner
 Gloria Salazar — Commissioner
 Nina Linda Ramos — Commissioner

Executive Director

Albert Sierra (stay tuned)

HOUSING OFFICES

Allen Woods Homes (Main Office)

512-353-5059

CM Allen Homes

512-353-1116

Chapultepec Homes

512-396-3364

Housing Choice Voucher

512-353-5061

Springtown Villa

512-396-3363

RESIDENT SERVICES

Chapultepec Adult Learning Center

Family Self-Sufficiency

512-396-3364

CM Allen KAD Korner Store

512-392-6273

Allen Woods PODER

Learning Center

512-396-3367

Springtown Villa

512-353-7343