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GREEN STARTUP IS A GROWING VENTURE

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Caption: PHOTO: MARIA J. ÁVILA LÓPEZ -- MERCURY NEWS
 Rosa Lopez and son Brian Lopez, 3, visit their home garden in San Jose. The family has received planter boxes from La Mesa Verde, and assistance growing such vegetables as kale and broccoli. Lopez looks forward to growing tomatoes.

PHOTO: MARIA J. ÁVILA LÓPEZ -- MERCURY NEWS
 La Mesa Verde Project Manager Raul Lozano, left, visits the backyard garden of Arturo Lopez, whose family is one of 30 participating in the program that helps low-income families grow their own organic vegetables.

PHOTO: MARIA J. ÁVILA LÓPEZ -- MERCURY NEWS
 After leaving his post as executive director of Teatro Vision, Raul Lozano embarked on a new venture: La Mesa Verde, which teaches low-income people to grow vegetables in their own backyards.

PHOTO: MARIA J. ÁVILA LÓPEZ -- MERCURY NEWS
 La Mesa Verde produce is grown organically: Goat droppings fertilize this backyard garden.

Once a month, Rosa Lopez lined up with her youngest child in tow for free food at a San Jose charity. Cheerful volunteers gave them grocery bags with bread, soup cans, rice, peanut butter and a few vegetables. Gracias, goodbye, see you next time.

But this dreary hunger routine changed for the better when she met a stocky, middle-age Latino professional who lived nearby. He had come to the charity with novel idea: In a city blessed with sunshine, he wanted to teach poor families like hers how to grow food in their backyards.

"We had to try something because money and food was running out, faster than before," Lopez said in Spanish.

And the man with the idea needed something new in his life, too. Raul Lozano had just left a prestigious job as the executive director of Teatro Vision, one of the oldest and most successful Latino theater companies in the country.

"I was burned out and had my fill," Lozano said about the fundraising side of show business. At 55, he wasn't set for retirement, either. "I had no idea what I was going to do next. Some people thought I was crazy."

But in less than a year, Lozano's idea, La Mesa Verde (The Green Table), has sprouted faster than a happy cabbage, winning over funders and volunteer gardeners eager to work directly with families who can't afford healthy, organically grown food.

On a recent warm day, Lozano visited the Lopezes, who live just south of San Jose State University. Sugar peas, butter lettuce, red and white Spanish onions, cauliflower and other veggies filled the 4-by-8-foot planter boxes, which Lozano gave them. With four children of their own, the Lopezes live in a small house with two other families, 14 people in all.



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The modest harvest won't eliminate Lopez's trips to the food pantry, but it does save the family the cost of fresh vegetables it would otherwise have to buy at the market.

"This is saving us quite a bit of money," said Arturo Lopez, a wall-framer who hasn't worked since injuring his back last year. "Our children are eating better. They come back here and eat a leaf of lettuce like candy."

What Lozano really wanted to know was if the Lopezes were picking and eating the vegetables on time. He noticed that the broccoli and Swiss chard were ripe but uncut.

"I don't know anything about broccoli," Arturo told Lozano. "I was going to cut it and then pull it out."

Lozano laughed in a kindhearted way. Each broccoli plant, he explained, will yield several heads before it gives out. But what about Swiss chard, a tall, leafy green?

"I thought it was a beet!" Arturo said. "I was waiting for the root to appear and dig it up."

This time Lozano laughed hard, but not at Lopez.

"Hey, I don't eat chard, either," he said in Spanish and again in English. "We Latinos don't eat chard. I was looking for culturally relevant seeds, but when they give you chard seeds at a discount, you take them."

Lozano never planned a career on stage or soil. Born into a farmworker family in the Central Valley, he moved to the Bay Area after high school and found employment with social service agencies. After he helped some Teatro friends build a stage, they invited him to join the board when the company incorporated as a nonprofit. He became executive director in 1999 - just in time for the dot-com crash and harder fundraising times for nonprofits.

Still, he grew the company's budget from \$180,000 to \$900,000.

Teatro Vision became the resident company at the city's Mexican Heritage Plaza, specializing in plays about Latino life in the United States and showcasing new talents like playwright Octavio Solis.

"We certainly didn't want him to go," said Brendan Rawson, a Teatro board member and close friend of Lozano. "But he worked so darn hard at Teatro, he wore himself down."

Without knowing it, Lozano was seeding a new career as he worked in his garden, wondering what he could do next. His farmworker and social worker past seemed to call out to him. He weighed the poverty in his Latino and immigrant neighborhood, which is nicknamed Barrio Horseshoe. Bingo.

"Why can't somebody teach the people in my neighborhood to grow food?" Lozano asked himself. "Why can't that person be me?"

He took the idea to Fred Ferrer, director of the Health Trust, which funds dozens of anti-poverty nutrition projects in Silicon Valley.

"Everybody does school or community gardens, but nobody was talking about growing food in backyards," Ferrer said. "When Raul asked for \$30,000, I told him to ask me for \$50,000."

He did, and Ferrer wrote the check on the spot.

Then Lozano asked Sacred Heart Community Service to be his nonprofit sponsor. The charity loved his idea so much, it took on La Mesa Verde and hired him as project manager.

"I was sold immediately on the idea," said Poncho Guevara, Sacred Heart director. "But I knew this would be a whole new initiative, not just one guy with a truck and wheelbarrow."

Actually, Lozano didn't have a truck, but he sure could use one or two now.

For more help, he approached the master gardening program at the University of California Extension school. He had taken its basic gardening class years before.

"This fits in with what we want to do," said Karen Schaeffer, the master gardener who designed the program's first planting. "It's an obviously great idea, the classic teaching somebody to do it themselves as opposed to just giving it to them."

When the master gardener program signed on, La Mesa Verde brought two different communities together - educated, English-speaking and mostly white volunteer gardeners at the front of the green movement with low-income, Spanish-speaking Latinos just struggling to survive.

La Mesa Verde is more than planting and eating. Master gardeners will serve as mentors, visiting each family twice a month. The 30 families so far must attend classes on organic gardening and nutrition, all at no cost.

Rosa Lopez can't wait for summer and tomatoes, and she's more than happy to learn what to do with chard.

"We're already cooking with less grease," she said. "The chard, I'm sure we'll make something really good with it."

Lozano's goal is to have 5,000 families - and 10,000 planter boxes - enrolled in La Mesa Verde before he retires, whenever that is. One day, he hopes, the families will be able to grow more organic vegetables than they can eat, and donate the healthy surplus to a local food bank.

"I'm a lucky man," Lozano said. "I've had one great career by accident and I'm starting a new one by accident."

Contact **Joe Rodriguez** at 408-920-5767.

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