

GONZALES

City receives Culture of Health Prize, national recognition



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From left to right, Jean Salcido, Isabel Mendoza, Mayor Maria Orozco, Sonia Jaramillo, Carmen Gil, and City Manager Rene Mendez at the RWJF Culture of Health Prize Celebration and Learning Event in Princeton, N.J., accepting Gonzales' Culture of Health Prize award.

The southern Monterey County city was among five communities out of 200 chosen for its efforts in creating a thriving community

By James Herrera

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GONZALES » Recognized for pursuing innovative ideas and bringing partners together to rally around a shared vision of health, the city of Gonzales was chosen to receive the 2019 Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Culture of Health Prize of \$25,000, and were part of a panel which shared its accomplishments in a live, nationwide webcast on Tuesday.

"It's such a great feeling to be here amongst other cities and to know how competitive it was and to be the only ones selected from California," said Maria Orozco, mayor of Gonzales.

Gonzales is one of five winners of the Culture of Health Prize which honors and elevates communities for working at the forefront of advancing health, opportunity and equity. The honorees were presented certificates at an award ceremony and were part of a panel dis-

cussion at the Prize Celebration and Learning Event in Princeton, New Jersey.

Orozco said discussions included Gonzales' efforts with community engagement and its ability to encourage citizen participation through its youth council, school board participation and other avenues.

"The 2019 RWJF Culture of Health Prize winners recognize that health is about more than just health care. It's about what happens where we live, work, learn, and play. They are fundamentally reshaping their communities so that everyone has a fair opportunity for health and well-being," said Dr. Richard Besser, president and CEO of RWJF, in a press release. "These communities show the nation that solutions are within our grasp when we use local data to identify challenges and work together to implement solutions brought forward by residents."

The University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute works to advance health and

well-being for all by developing and evaluating interventions and promoting evidence-based approaches to policy and practice at the local, state, and national levels. The institute leads the work on the County Health Rankings & Roadmaps and the RWJF Culture of Health Prize.

"The team came to the community and met with more than 40 citizens" to get independent input, said Rene Mendez, the Gonzales city manager.

"I think it's amazing and an affirmation of the great work our community is doing. It's a journey and we're not done, but it's a positive affirmation," said Mendez.

Chosen from nearly 200 applicant communities across the country, Gonzales' award-winning efforts include implementing initiatives and programs over the last decade that are resulting in progress in Gonzales on youth engagement, economic development, health care access and sustainability.

Gonzales will receive a

\$25,000 prize, join a network of prize-winning communities and have its accomplishments shared nationwide.

Mayor Orozco said no decisions have yet been made on how to spend the \$25,000 prize money but she stressed city leaders want to do something with and for the community.

The city of Gonzales had to demonstrate how it excelled in six criteria:

- Defining health in the broadest possible terms
- Committing to sustainable systems changes and policy-oriented long-term solutions
- Creating conditions that give everyone a fair and just opportunity to reach their best possible health
- Harnessing the collective power of leaders, partners, and community members
- Securing and making the most of available resources
- Measuring and sharing progress and results

Mendez said it was a combination of things that made Gon-

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zales stand out such as the authentic engagement with the community and the championing of the city's youth.

"We try to listen to our citizens and understand their concerns," said Mendez.

Orozco, who has been mayor for 10 years, said that in that time, the long-standing community engagement programs have really paid off.

Besides Gonzales, four other communities were recognized including Broward County, Florida; Greenville County, South Carolina; Lake County, Colorado; and Sitka, Alaska. The Salinas Valley city joins Santa Cruz County, Santa Monica, and San Pablo as the fourth California community to win the prize.

A delegation of six community leaders from Gonzales were at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation along



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Jimmy Eitoku is the owner of Gonzales Pharmacy. He received a city-backed low interest business loan to create a walk-in sonogram clinic inside the pharmacy. Rosa Leon (right) and Imelda Lopez (left) are both Pharmacy Technicians.

with representatives from the other 2019 Prize-winning communities which were all honored as part of the Prize Celebration and Learning Event at RWJF headquarters in Princeton, New Jersey. Delegates participated in several activities, two of which were web-cast live.

The six Gonzales community leaders included Mayor Maria Orozco, City

Manager Rene Mendez, Youth Commissioner Isabel Mendoza, Gonzales Resident Leader Jean Salcido, Monterey County Health Department Health in All Policies Manager Carmen Gil, and Gonzales Unified School District School Board President Sonia Jaramillo.

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