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COMMUNITY WATCH

New Westside leader has been to war zones and built coalitions after natural disasters

By JESUS LOPEZ-GOMEZ
Special to The Star

Jorge Coromac's work has taken him to the site of disaster-stricken areas and war zones.

His newest assignment is director of the Westside Community Action Network (CAN), an organization with a mission to create a safe, healthy, civically engaged neighborhood in which to live and work.

In a certain sense, the professional trajectories of Coromac and his predecessor, the late Lynda Callon, couldn't be more different.

Where Callon's two decades of experience in community outreach started with advocating for accessible housing, her successor spent years as a disaster-relief coordinator. He worked as a journalist in Guatemala, when his home country was ravaged by civil war.

Coromac said his skill sets — active listening and community-based action — have helped him succeed in both fields. Both reporting, and skills in solving such challenges as getting supplies into Haiti after the magnitude 7.0 earthquake that struck in 2010, will help him in his leadership role.

And Coromac considered Callon a hero, as he worked with her frequently during his days as vice president, and later executive director, of Woodland Public Charities, a Kansas City-based nonprofit with a focus on Central Americans' access to education, clean drinking

water and health.

The Westside center's longtime supporter, Barb Bailey, the interim director between Callon and Coromac, sees the connection between the talents of Coromac and Callon.

Reflecting on Callon's 15 years as director of the Westside Center, Bailey said Callon's legacy is in standing with overlooked figures, be they day laborers, children or the elderly.

"Number one, first and foremost, she was about kids and seniors," Bailey said. "All little kids should have a great place to grow up in, and all seniors should have a great place to grow old in. She was speaking for people who didn't have a voice."

Bailey, who now serves as the center's office manager, said looking forward, she and Coromac would like to build the center's profile and expand its services to offer a job-readiness program and adult education component.

Callon abruptly stepped down last fall — a move



Jorge Coromac is the director of the Westside Community Action Network in Kansas City.

prompted by an unusually aggressive cancer. She died in October, leaving big shoes to fill.

In Callon's two decades with the center, she worked to build the organization's flagship operation: to provide a shelter, shower and coffee for the mainly Latino

day laborers who would otherwise be waiting under an Interstate 35 overpass above Southwest Boulevard. The center's broad catalog of social services also runs the gamut from neighborhood beautification to pro bono building-code consulting.

Callon handled the duties with grace, endearing herself to the day workers who crafted a makeshift memorial for her at the center. Pictures of her sit alongside the accolades her service garnered.

Walking alongside the numerous accolades, Coromac said his predecessor's accomplishments embolden him.

"I really admire how she made everything come together," he said. "Everyone here knows this is challenging work."

Coromac has been at his current post since December. He said managing the Westside community center's operations matches the fundamentals he practiced as an aid coordinator: identify existing resources and make them work in a recovery plan.

Coromac's training with Children International helping communities recover from Hurricane Mitch enabled him to identify remaining resources. After the survivors were recovered, they needed access to safe living space. To that end, he used a schoolhouse and repurposed it into a waste storage facility, protecting the health and sanitation of the survivors.

He was with Heart to Heart International while helping earthquake victims in Haiti.

During his entire two-de-

cade career in disaster relief management, Coromac said, partnerships were essential to making his work and the communities he targeted successful, and this will be essential to CAN's operations moving forward, as well.

"My passion is always to understand what kinds of collaborations I can create," he said, adding that this is why he's looking into how the community resource center can partner with a broad array of institutions, including local universities, medical care providers and media outlets, to boost the center's visibility.

Coromac's background in journalism gives him a bit of an edge with those media groups. He said interviewing Honduran neighbors in a war-torn country while he was a reporter instilled in him compassion for others.

Coromac worked alongside Callon for over a decade, and "he really shares the vision and mission and compassion," Bailey said. "He gets it."

Then, as now, Bailey said, "he's always asking people 'Well, can you help do this, can you help do that?' He just starts looking for connections, gradually finding tools. It's like working with the Energizer bunny."

"In a lot of ways, he's like how Lynda was. Not just anyone can sit in this chair and do this work."