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LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

THE RAMIREZ FAMILY

By Stacy Vogel Davis, for BizTimes

Two words describe the giving philosophy of the Ramirez family: all in.

The family behind Waukesha-based Husco International doesn't just fund schools in Central America; they regularly visit to make sure the schools are offering quality education. They don't just encourage employees to give to United Way; they match the giving, and Husco president and chief executive officer Austin Ramirez is co-chairman of this year's campaign.

"They don't just talk about the stuff they care about; they really dig in," said Amy Lindner, president and CEO of United Way of Greater Milwaukee and Waukesha County. "They make their personal investment in things that they're really passionate about."

The biggest example of the family's all-in mentality stands on Milwaukee's south side at St. Augustine Preparatory Academy. The Ramirez family funded most of the building and established the framework for the school. Austin's sister, Abby Andrietsch, is the school's chief executive officer.

"They're a real treasure to the entire community," said Ricardo Diaz, who retired

this year as executive director of the United Community Center serving Milwaukee's Latino community.

When Becky and Augustin "Gus" Ramirez married 51 years ago, they never dreamed they'd be able to give in the amounts they do now, Becky said. But they always knew they wanted to give back.

"I have always had the belief that to whom much is given, much is expected, and God has given to us abundantly," she said.

Husco, which manufactures hydraulics and electro-mechanical components for automobiles and off-highway machines, grew rapidly after Gus assumed ownership and leadership of the company in 1985. He became chairman in 2011 after turning over daily operations to his son, Austin.

Some of the family's earliest giving was to universities involved in advanced manufacturing, such as Georgia Technical College, where they donated \$2 million to establish a fluid power chairmanship.

Other educational endeavors followed naturally. Becky was a teacher, and their daughters, Abby Andrietsch and Anna Baritt, eventually entered the education field. Gus became more interested in urban

education after joining the United Community Center board, he said.

They started giving to schools in Latin America at the invitation of a pastor. Over 18 years they have supported close to 200 Christian schools, mostly in Central America, helping about 300,000 students. The family visits often to check on the schools and students.

The family's interest in education inspired Abby to co-found Schools that Can Milwaukee in 2010. She served eight years as executive director of the nonprofit, which sought to train leaders in public, charter and private schools. It merged with Partners Advancing Values in Education to become City Forward Collective in 2018. Austin serves as co-chairman of City Forward.

But Gus felt called to do more, he said. He talked to his family about building a school on Milwaukee's south side. St. Augustine Preparatory Academy opened in fall 2017 and now has 1,450 students in grades K4 through 12. The Ramirez family contributed \$40 million toward the \$52 million cost and gives about \$2 million a year to help supplement the school's income, Gus said. More than 99% of stu-

dents receive school choice vouchers.

The project was not without controversy. The alderman at the time, Tony Zielinski, wanted to build a soccer facility at the site. Public school advocates opposed the addition of a private, religious school that would be largely supported by taxes.

The idea also generated much discussion among the family, which had never taken on so large a project.

"My initial response was, 'This is crazy,'" Austin said.

But he realized Gus wanted to make a significant impact on Milwaukee education during his lifetime and had given up hope of systemic change in Milwaukee Public Schools.

St. Augustine is built around four pillars: faith, family, academics and athletics/arts.

"We're committed to serving the whole student, body and soul," said Abby, who became CEO in 2019.

Anna Baritt, who was an early childhood teacher, and Nathan Carlberg, the elementary principal, traveled to successful schools across the country while planning the school to see what was working. Anna also assisted with the hiring process, mak-

ing sure teachers believed in the values and mission of the nondenominational Christian school.

The school is exceeding the family's vision for it, Anna said.

"You go in there and you see the kids' faces, and they just glow," she said.

The first senior class will graduate this year, and more than 40% of them have been accepted to Marquette University, Abby said. More than 50% of students were at or above the national average in testing last year.

"It's outstanding in every aspect," Diaz, of the United Community Center, said of the school.

St. Augustine is planning an expansion that will create a separate building for the elementary school and add 800 to 900 students. Leaders hope to break ground around January 2022 and open the building in fall 2023. The Ramirez family expects to contribute \$25 million of the \$33 million cost, Gus said. Gus also dreams of adding a second school on the north side of Milwaukee, although that would require significant contributions from corporate donors, he said.

Education is the family's largest area of focus, but it's not the only one. The family, through a combination of foundation, corporate and personal giving, donated \$9 million to more than 60 organizations in 2019, Austin said. Husco matches employee giving to United Way, the United Performing Arts Fund and many nonprofits. Company executives are expected to serve on the board of nonprofits or community organizations.

Austin recently took on another leadership role as co-chairman of Democracy Found, an effort to reduce partisanship in congressional elections by holding non-partisan primaries and ranked voting in the general election. He realized the need for change after serving as a White House fellow in economics in 2016-17 and seeing the amount of dysfunction in Washington, D.C., he said.

"Austin is so generous with his time and resources," said Sara Eskrich, Democracy Found executive director. "That's unique, to have an executive who is so committed personally and engaged personally with the philanthropy that he and his family and his company do." ●



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