

# San Antonio Express-News

Sunday, February 23, 2020 | ExpressNews.com and mySA.com | Vol. 155, No. 146 | The voice of South Texas since 1865 | \$4.00

Cloudy: High 70, Low 58

## Rising star moving to a new world

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**By Greg Jefferson**  
STAFF WRITER

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than it did to most others.

He'd made the same journey from his hometown to Stanford in Palo Alto, Calif., nine years after the Castros did. And for him, too, it was his first plane trip.

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Now, Saldaña, the former four-term city councilman, current VIA Metropolitan Transit board chairman and presumptive future mayoral candidate, is leaving San Antonio again.

In mid-March, he'll take over as CEO of Arlington, Va.-based Communities in Schools, a national nonprofit that helps at-risk chil-

dren and teens in public schools. Saldaña, his wife, Jessica, and their 1-year-old son, Eli, are moving to the Washington, D.C., area.

He'll be CIS' first chief executive who benefited from the program as a teenager.

Not that he was troubled. A CIS adviser at South San High School convinced him he could make it into the likes of Stanford.

"My life is a quilt of taking advantage of free programs that were available to me," he said.

The first time Saldaña left home, he was a model student. His record glittered with excellent grades, participation in a well-publicized campaign to bring a bookstore to the South Side and

*New era continues on A20*



Bob Owen / Staff photographer

Rey Saldaña says goodbye to friend and activist Marissa Ramirez, a South San High School graduate from 1998.





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Saldaña gets a congratulatory handshake from fellow South San High School graduate Jesus Rendon.



Rey Saldaña and his wife, Jessica Flynn Saldaña, pick up their 16-month-old son, Eli, from Mustard Seed Academy.





Photos by Bob Owen / Staff photographer

A proud product of the South Side, Saldaña was told he was aiming too low when he thought of attending a local college. He applied for and made it into Stanford.

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Saldaña won his first campaign for the City Council soon after graduating from college.

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“My life is a quilt of taking advantage of free programs that were available to me,” he said.

The first time Saldaña left home, he was a model student. His record glittered with excellent grades, participation in a well-publicized campaign to bring a bookstore to the South Side and baseball stats — he was a catcher with a batting average of .340 — impressive enough to secure his place on Stanford’s team.

The difference this time is that he has political cachet and connections, in addition to sex appeal. At 33, he’s a star in the making.

“He can be mayor if he wants to be. He could be a congressman,” said U.S. Rep. Joaquin Castro, for whom Saldaña interned in 2009 when he served as a Democratic state representative. Leading CIS “will only enhance his future.”

The profile he’s carved out for himself — a product of the long-neglected South Side, grateful public servant, a high-energy fighter for low-income San Antonians who need more reliable bus service and paid sick leave — is a big reason he landed his new job.

In October, billionaire Elaine Wynn, known as the “Queen of Las Vegas,” called Saldaña on his cellphone to ask him to consider seeking the position. The co-founder of Mirage Resorts and Wynn Resorts chairs the nonprofit’s national board.

“I gave her Rey’s name,” said Dale Erquiaga, whom Saldaña will replace.

Wynn’s call wasn’t out of the blue. Saldaña has served on CIS’ board for two years.

Erquiaga had recruited him for the board a few years ago. They’d met when Erquiaga toured CIS schools in San Antonio — nearly half of the 1.62 million children the nonprofit serves are in Texas.

Wynn and Erquiaga liked his political chops.

“We wanted (a CIS) alum who was far along in their career,” Erquiaga said. “He had the added advantage of being an elected official. I knew he would have the skills to navigate that world” — a world of fundraising and dealing with school boards and administrators.

Still, Wynn and the other directors wanted to make sure he wouldn’t be a short-timer, leaving to campaign for office in San Antonio soon after accepting the job. Erquiaga said he committed to staying “until the job was done.”

“That means I won’t be running for mayor any time soon,” Saldaña said.

Qualifiers don’t come much more pronounced than that.

## **Busing it**

The key to Saldaña’s and the Castros’ political success is their “story.” It’s all about aspiration and meritocracy, the old-fashioned American virtues, tempered with the belief that the deck is stacked against low-income, minority communities. They know what it’s like to scrape by in an economically segregated city.

They grew up poor but with loving, supportive parents, surrounded by families that struggled just as much as theirs. They were gifted with keen intelligence and driven by ambition. They thrived in public schools and made it to the Ivy League. They had a rough, lonely transition, but persevered. Then they came back to lead.

But none of that matters without gritty political skills — including the ability to raise campaign cash, charm voters, work other elected officials and leverage connections — or an issue to champion.

Like transportation.

In June 2015, in his fourth year on council, Saldaña parked his Buick Regal — he now drives a 2014 Ford Explorer — and took the bus for a month. He missed some meetings and was late to others, spending too much time waiting for the next bus.

He drew on — or used, depending on your point of view — the experience to push for increased funding for VIA, which receives half of the sales-tax revenue it’s allowed to take in under state law. His first attempt to get the city to kick in an extra \$10 million failed in 2016 under Mayor Ivy Taylor.

That defeat, by a 6-5 vote, “lit a fire under him, and it changed him” said Tim Salas, a friend of Saldaña and his former chief of staff. “He became more focused.”

Two years later, he got what he wanted. The City Council OK’d the extra \$10 million for VIA, with Mayor Ron Nirenberg’s support.



Making transportation his big issue also got him the appointment as VIA's chairman. That's put him in the middle of the campaign to shift about \$40 million a year in sales-tax funding from Edwards Aquifer protection to VIA. It's expected to go on the November ballot.

Saldaña, who still takes the bus once a week, said he's worried the campaign so far isn't centered on people who have to rely on bus service. He talks about a maid named Berta who takes the bus to get to work in affluent Alamo Heights.

"She's invisible to this community, she's invisible to the voters," he said.

Berta matters to him. She's also one of his talking points. That's politics.

## **Exits, entries**

In order to come home, first you have to leave. That was an ordeal for Saldaña.

The Bay Area in 2005 seemed unaware of his high school exploits. He struggled at first, socially and academically.

At Stanford, he said he was knocked off balance by "the wealth of the place, the wealth of the people and how far behind I was." Early in his freshman year, he got an essay back covered in red, like it had bled to death, and failed multi-variable calculus.

But he rebounded, finishing his undergrad degrees in political science and communications with a respectable GPA of 3.1.

That kind of experience resonates loudly in what the U.S. Census Bureau has identified as one of the nation's poorest big cities — and where Hispanics make up 64 percent of the population.

For Saldaña, the financial aid part of preparing for college was eye-opening (though he later won a full-ride Gates Millennium academic scholarship). One of five siblings, it hit him as he filled out the paperwork that household income of \$26,000 a year wasn't much to live on.

He hadn't noticed his family's dicey financial condition before gleaning numbers from his father's W2 tax statement. Why would he? He'd had plenty of company in his neighborhood.

District 4 remains one of San Antonio's most economically hard-pressed, with a poverty rate of 22 percent and per-capita income of \$16,316 — more than \$7,000 below the city average.

His father, Reynold Saldaña, crossed the border in 1980 from his hometown of Sabinas Hidalgo in the northern Mexican state of Nuevo León. Undocumented, he settled in San Antonio, where he courted and married Marisela, Saldaña's mother, who'd moved here from McAllen as a child.

Both had been tweens when they stopped going to school.

Reynold was a meat-cutter before landing a job at H-E-B's warehouse near Rittiman Road. He's worked there for 29 years.

Tim Salas, who's godfather to Eli Saldaña, said his former boss spent a lot of his childhood afraid his father would be caught and deported. "That really affected him."

Reynaldo became a U.S. citizen in 1999, when Saldaña was enrolled at Kazen Middle School.  
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“I remember we would study for the citizenship exam together,” the younger Saldaña said.

Early in his first council term, which started in 2011, Saldaña said he wangled a meeting with H-E-B Chairman Charles Butt to introduce himself and his father, who practiced salutations in English a week or two beforehand.

When Reynold launched awkwardly into his rehearsed introduction — “He was visibly nervous, he turned pale,” his son said — Butt countered by greeting him in Spanish. Their conversation took off from there, in Spanish.

Saldaña’s wife, Jessica, also works for the San Antonio grocery chain, scouring data for insights into H-E-B customer behavior. And the job he’s leaving is regional advocacy director for Raise Your Hand Texas, an Austin-based education nonprofit largely bankrolled by Butt.

### **Touching down**

Saldaña didn’t have a shortage of people offering career help as he prepared to leave the council. Richard Perez, president of the San Antonio Chamber of Commerce and a former District 4 councilman, said he put him in touch with several private-sector employers, though he declined to name them.

Perez had liked the younger South Sider right away.

In late 2010 and early 2011, Saldaña was gearing up for his first campaign in District 4. He was 23, and wanted Perez’s advice.

To get it, he enlisted a geometry teacher who’d taught both him and Perez in middle school, though years apart. The teacher, Alpha Cobarruvias, called Perez to set up the meeting. “She made the connection,” Perez said, laughing.

What could he say? He took the meeting in his chamber office.

By then, Saldaña already had a history of leveraging meetings with people in positions to help his nascent political climb. When he wanted to introduce himself to the Castro brothers, he said he contacted their mother, Rosie Castro, to ask her to set it up.

Saldaña was expected to lose the District 4 race to Leticia Cantu, a City Hall insider, Castro ally and then-fiancee of outgoing District 4 incumbent Philip Cortez. She’d served as interim councilwoman for several months in 2010 while Cortez underwent Air Force training.

Saldaña had returned home after earning a master’s in education policy at Stanford. Literally: he’d move back in with his parents on West Mally Boulevard, a few blocks from Palo Alto College.

When Perez told him voters might have a problem with a young candidate who’d never made a mortgage payment, Perez recalled, “he said, ‘Hey, I don’t have any bills to pay. I can focus on helping the community.’ He turned it around on me!”

Because of his position at the chamber, Perez couldn’t endorse him. Instead, he said he frequently met with Saldaña to talk strategy and District 4 issues.

“We’d meet in a restaurant and sit in one of the back corners,” Perez said.

Saldaña relentlessly block-walked the district, helped by a group of Stanford friends. One of them, campaign manager Matt Platkin, currently is chief counsel to New Jersey Gov. Philip Murphy.

He stunned onlookers on Election Day, taking 52 percent of the vote to Cantu's 39 percent. At 24, he was one of San Antonio's youngest-ever council members.

And he did it without the support of Julián or Joaquin Castro. Despite the strong parallels between the three of them — and Joaquin's view that Saldaña "represented the future of San Antonio" — the twins backed Cantu.

"Leticia had been a very good friend and a good supporter of me and my brother," Castro said. "Still, that was such a tough decision.

"The most remarkable part of it was the way Rey handled it. He was incredibly mature. ... You have to understand how difficult it is to do that."

Saldaña hasn't forgotten. But that's politics — and he got that a long time ago. [greg.jefferson@express-news.net](mailto:greg.jefferson@express-news.net)