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## Hard work, mentors and faith are the foundation for this Caddo Parish Commissioner and businessman



One on one with:

# MARIO CHAVEZ

*Official Journal Shreveport, Blanchard and Greenwood*

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OVER FOR**

**THE INQUISITOR**  
Shreveport, Louisiana's Most Trusted News Source

# Mario Chavez: From troubled youth to commissioner

**KERRY M. KIRSPEL**

Focus SB News

Caddo Parish Commissioner Mario Chavez is an inspiring modern-day entrepreneur. The example of how one's life can turn around 180 degrees. The parish's first Hispanic-American commissioner had a troubled youth as a dropout but overcame that burden to become a successful businessman and civil servant.

"We do a lot of identity politics in Louisiana," he said, adding that his ethnicity should not define his identity, but rather his accomplishments and qualifications, "but it is what it is."

Accolades have come easily to Chavez. As commissioner, he was named Public

Official of the Year. In the military, he was nominated Soldier of the Year. "It's not just that you're part of something," he said. "When you're part of something, how do you do while you're there?"

"People always look at the accolades, and I got put into the position where I was a troubled youth and now a Caddo commissioner over juvenile justice, which are the troubled youth," he said.

Chavez said he obtained his education through contact with successful people. "I'm not educated. Everybody that I've come in contact within business, I wanted to know how are they successful. What did they do? Tell me the secret to success. And I would surround myself with enough successful people that would tell me the good things that I need to know."

Chavez was born in southern California and moved to Shreveport in 1995 at age 15. His father worked for General Motors, and when the GM plant closed down, he was given the option to move to several locations and chose Shreveport "only because it was the warmest spot."

"I was going to come over here for ninth grade and then go back (to California) to finish high school, and that'd be that," he said. "But I'm glad God had other plans because when I came here, I found the same kids like myself, a little heathen kid that was getting into mischief because I didn't know anybody. So in finding the heathens, I didn't go to school that much, ran the streets, skipped school, so I had to do ninth grade again."

That's when he met the mother of his son, and he struggled through his second attempt at the ninth grade. "I think they passed me because they felt sorry for me," he said.

"But then after the first month of the 10th grade, I said, this isn't working. I've got to go to work. I've got too much going on, and that's when I dropped out."

Chavez then found himself in jail. His mom sent bail money from California,

while his dad was practicing some "tough love."

"He wasn't going to get me out of jail. At the time, the 17-year-olds go to CCC, so I was at CCC. ... He got me out about a month later, and the cool thing was, I finally decided while I was in there, you know, this ain't working. I've got a kid, I'm 17, and I dropped out of high school ... I'm a loser."

Before Chavez's stint in jail, however, his son's mother tried taking him to Summer Grove Baptist Church, and he decided to "try this whole Jesus thing" because "my way isn't working."

He asked his father why he waited to get him out of jail because "the same day that I prayed was the same day I got out (of jail). And he said, 'God told me to. That morning I heard the Lord say, go get your son today.'"

Once out of jail, Chavez realized he needed a change, and his dad showed him a news article about a five-month course called Youth Challenge in which he could earn a GED and training, during which time his father would look after his son.

Youth Challenge is a structured living program run by the Louisiana National Guard that operates by core values, including personal hygiene, education and community service. Basically, Chavez

said, they took the best elements from the military.

"And I flourished in it. And most kids do, because most kids that are going awry, they don't have any structure. They're probably stuck in a single-parent household, and the kid has enough freedom to where he can get into trouble."

Today, Chavez serves as a mentor to a youth in the Youth Challenge Program.

From there, he joined the National Guard because he wanted to learn a skill, "something high-tech." In the military, he learned telecommunications, specifically fiber-optic satellite communications and GPS tracking systems.

His stint in the military helped him when he got a job working for the phone company and as a plant support technician.

However, he didn't want to be stuck in a cubicle all day. He preferred to be one of the technicians he summoned into the field.

While in the call center, he saw the sales guys rolling in at 9 a.m. and leaving at 3 p.m., "and then I found out they made twice as much as me," he said.

However, he did not get a sales job due to lack of experience. As it turned out, his old boss at the call center got a job at a cell phone store and offered him an outside sales position, but the pay was disappointing. However, it would give him the sales experience he craved.

The Sunday before he had to make a decision, he said, a lady at church came

up to him and said, "God told me that you have a tough decision to make. Go ahead and do it. It's going to be OK."

Another example of God guiding his steps. Today he has a sales staff of 10. His business, Merchant Services, installs the hardware for what accepts credit card payments and the accompanying service.

So how did he get into politics? Enter God again. Chavez began to help out local non-profits and candidates in which he believed by offering his services at no charge. "I couldn't give them money, but what I could do is I could show up with my equipment, accept credit cards as donations on their behalf for their charity and a lot of candidates," he said.

While Chavez was at a campaign fundraiser for Caddo Sheriff Steve Prator, a woman struck up a conversation with him and asked what he thought of the Southern Hills neighborhood where he lived. Chavez's assessment was not positive because of its dirty appearance and crime rate. She suggested he do something about it.

Their commissioner was term-limited, and they had been searching for someone to run for his position, and she suggested he try. "Something she said convicted me. It was to the point, like, if you can do something about it and you don't, then you're part of the problem. That kind of hits home."

Chavez gave it some thought. "Making money is not a purpose," he said. "You need a purpose in life. And I had missed having a purpose. And in the military, you're somebody. You're a soldier; you have a purpose. And it feels good to be called upon." He asked his wife if he should go for it, and she said, "I knew you were going to do it the minute she asked you. You can't say no to anybody."

Bottom line: He won. "God has His plan," he said. "The other guy that was running against me got disqualified."

Chavez is currently in his second term as commissioner and said he likely will not seek a third. "I think I've made some significant changes in eight years," the length of two terms.

"I was named Public Official of the Year in my third year of my first term," he said. "I think being named Public Official of the Year goes to show that I'm doing a good job."

Chavez has been mentioned as a potential candidate for next year's Shreveport mayor's race. If he chooses to run, he will be the city's first Hispanic, or "brown," candidate. Chavez said he will run "if it's in god's plan."

In the meantime, politics aside, Chavez has truly found his calling to help troubled youth find their way and prove that, **no matter what one's circumstances are, hard work, mentors and faith will result in a truly fulfilled life.**

**"Making money is not a purpose. ... You need a purpose in life."**

