Cabrillo appointee seeking four-year term

Trustee says she brings unique perspective

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WATSONVILLE — Margarita Cortez faced adversity early in life, growing up as the youngest of 10 children in a home headed by a mother who could neither read nor write — then suffering a stroke at the age of 10 that left her partially paralyzed.

But instead of giving up, the strength and determination needed to overcome her physical limitations served as an early test. She enrolled at UC Santa Barbara straight out of Watsonville High School, graduating with a degree in political science.

Cortez, who now serves as executive director of the Loaves and Fishes food pantry and kitchen in Watsonville, is seeking a full, four-year term for the Area V seat, which covers Watsonville and the surrounding area.

Ahead of the 2010 elections, she worked as a field organizer in San Diego for the county's Democratic Party, gaining many of the skills she needed to take over the helm of Loaves and Fishes in early 2011. About a year later, she filled the seat vacated by former Trustee Rebecca Garcia.

“For me, when I heard she was resigning and retiring, I thought I definitely had the skills” required to fill that position, she said. Not only that, but she also had a unique perspective as a member of the Latino community, coming from a struggling, one-parent family with aspirations of attending college.

“I can relate to Latinos and speak to people who are setting a legacy” for future generations, she said. “Being able to serve on the board is an honor, but I'm also able to contribute a lot to it.”

Cabrillo faces a $4.6 million shortfall in 2012-13, but will use reserves to bring that figure down to $2 million. Next month, the board could cut 152 teaching units, five already vacant positions and nine currently filled positions to save about $1 million.

Cortez said she acknowledges the difficulties ahead. But it’s important, she said, to “continue to preserve what is often referred to as the ‘Cabrillo Way,’” or the rich contributions the institution brings to the community at large.

She’d only been a board member for about four months when she attended graduation ceremonies in June, which saw the largest number of associate degrees and certificates handed out in five years. Cortez “saw the sense of accomplishment of the youth coming through the line,” she said, and spoke with many who already had their next steps planned.

When asked what steps the Board of Trustees might look toward in the future, she said it’s “a matter of looking at the broader picture and providing a sense of leadership with a sense of awareness of what's going on around us ... Cabrillo has risen to the challenge and will continue to do that.”

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