

The priest who spent 40 years fighting to reshape El Paso

Robert Moore June 2, 2021



For four decades, the Rev. Ed Roden-Lucero has influenced El Paso far beyond the walls of the parishes he pastored. He has been a key part of efforts to bring water and sewer services to tens of thousands of homes, and train hundreds of El Pasoans for jobs that paid a living wage and altered lives.

The moral and political campaigns behind his efforts often brought him in conflict with elected officials, business leaders and his church superiors. Roden-Lucero has not been one to avoid conflict.

“My mother used to say I had a big mouth, I talk too much,” he said. “You know, she was probably right. But I’ve never been afraid to speak truth to power, whether that was the mayor or the judge or the bishop.”

This week, more than 40 years after arriving in El Paso as a candidate for ordination, the 65-year-old Roden-Lucero is returning to his hometown of Albuquerque to be closer to his family and serve the [historic Immaculate Conception Church](#).

He celebrated his last Sunday Mass at St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Church in East El Paso on May 30, which was both the Feast of the Trinity in Catholicism and Memorial Day weekend in the United States. In his homily, Roden-Lucero contrasted the sense of sharing implicit in the Catholic feast day with the commercialization of the national holiday.

“There are endless advertisements, Memorial Day sales to buy a car, Memorial Day sales for a discount oil change, discount for a mattress, Memorial Day sales for shoes and clothes. So it strikes me odd every year that on a solemn day on Memorial Day, we’re thinking about those that died for the country as people try to make money off of that,” he said.



Rev. Ed Roden-Lucero concludes the Eucharistic prayer during his final Sunday Mass at St. Thomas Aquinas Church on May 30. (Corrie Boudreaux/El Paso Matters)

It was not a new message for the parishioners. Their priest, known as Father Ed, has made it clear that his life is motivated by [Catholic social teaching](#), which instructs the faithful to put the needs of the [poor and vulnerable first](#).

“I’ve always thought that El Paso’s poverty rate was a scandal, and I never understood why the business community and the elected officials didn’t also think it was a scandal, a situation of urgency. Let’s put the whole city’s creativity around reducing poverty. And that would always frustrate me and anger me,” Roden-Lucero said in an interview with El Paso Matters.

Those who worked with him said he fought poverty and injustice wherever he saw it. EPISO was involved in efforts to build El Paso Children’s

Hospital and expand University Medical Center clinics across the county so that more people would have access to health care.

While Roden-Lucero served as pastor of San Juan Diego Catholic Church in Montana Vista, EPISO led an effort to divide the Clint Independent School District Board of Trustees into single-member districts so that power and resources were more evenly divided.

When one of his 18-year-old parishioners in Montana Vista, Ruben Estrella Soto, was killed in 2003 in Iraq, he used the funeral Mass to denounce the war — in the presence of the Army chief of staff and other top officers.

“I think that I’m not the type of guy to tell people to say Hail Mary, God loves you and call it a nice day. You know, I’m going to call a spade a spade,” Roden-Lucero said.

Although he was active on many issues, two major initiatives define Roden-Lucero’s legacy in El Paso — the fight to get water to the *colonias*, and the creation of [Project ARRIBA](#), which provides education and skills development to move people from poverty into living-wage jobs.

The fight for water

Roden-Lucero arrived in El Paso a couple of years after a group of mostly Catholic churches formed the [El Paso Interreligious Sponsoring Organization](#), or EPISO, a nonprofit organization that trained community-based leaders to advocate for issues important to them. He had received training from the [Industrial Areas Foundation](#), EPISO’s parent organization, before coming to El Paso.

His first pastoral assignment was in 1982 at La Purisima Catholic Church in Socorro, one of dozens of communities outside the city limits of El Paso where illegal subdivisions without water or wastewater services had been allowed to take root for decades.



Father Ed Roden-Lucero says goodbye and offers blessings to parishioners at the end of his final Sunday Mass at St. Thomas Aquinas Church. (Corrie Boudreaux/El Paso Matters)

EPISO leaders quickly focused on the dire situation in colonias, neighborhoods along the U.S.-Mexico border that had been developed without the most basic human services. By the mid-1980s, more than 80,000 El Paso County residents lived in homes without water or wastewater services. Many of them developed hepatitis A because they drank from water wells dug next to septic tanks.

“It’s incredible, the suffering, and how many people we talked to who were told the lie (by developers) that if you can spend two years without water, that’s how long it will take us to get the services. So people would buy these little properties inexpensively. They could afford it even if they were poor, and ended up waiting 20, 25 years” for water and wastewater services, Roden-Lucero said.

State and local leaders had shown little interest in addressing the growing crisis. So EPISO and other IAF affiliates across Texas organized and

turned up the heat, bringing national media attention to shameful conditions along the border.

Dolores DeAvila, an educator in El Paso's Lower Valley and EPISO member, met Roden-Lucero in the early 1980s and was part of the fight to bring water to the colonias.

"I have learned a lot from him in terms of his being very courageous, acting on his beliefs and working with his parishioners, engaging them in their needs," she said.

Years of lobbying and public pressure by EPISO and its sister organizations paid off in 1989, when Texas voters passed a bond issue to begin the process of providing water and wastewater infrastructure to border colonias.

More than 30 years later, the fight to connect colonia residents to water systems continues.

"I was looking at an article (from 2019) where we continue to work on trying to get money for water and wastewater services. And Montana Vista, the colonia, just got phase one, it was, I believe, \$13 million to begin to do some needs there," DeAvila said.

Project ARRIBA

Over the past 60 years, poverty has been more persistent in El Paso County than in the state and nation.

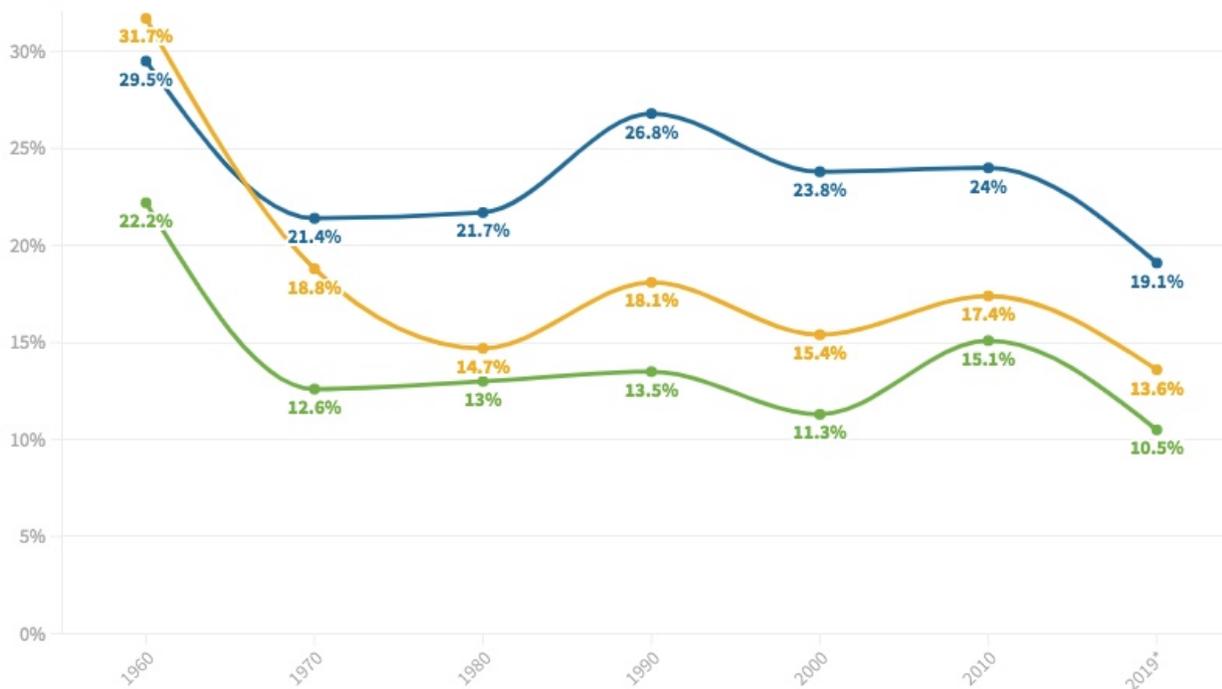
By the mid-1990s, almost a quarter of El Paso's population lived in poverty, more than twice the national rate.

"So the discussion shifts a little bit towards the general issue of poverty in the county," Roden-Lucero said. "In our house meetings, people told us what that reality was, no money to go to college, all the obstacles that they had, no automobile, can't afford child care, all of that."

At the same time, employers often talked about gaps between the skills they needed and those available in the labor force.

Poverty rates in El Paso, Texas and United States since 1960

■ El Paso ■ Texas ■ United States



“I think one of the shockers that really pushed us was finding out how much money Thomason (Hospital) was paying to recruit nurses from the Philippines,” Roden-Lucero said. “Hundreds of thousands of dollars for people who weren’t committed to staying in the city once they could get a better paying position.”

A few years earlier, EPISO’s sister organization in San Antonio had created [Project Quest](#), an initiative to provide education and training to prepare people for jobs that paid a living wage. Funding came from both governments and the private sector.

Roden-Lucero and other EPISO organizers began working to develop a similar initiative in El Paso.

Bob Snow, a longtime executive at Chase Bank, was among the first to meet with Roden-Lucero and the neighborhood leaders advocating for a training initiative aimed at preparing people for living-wage jobs.

“You have to remember, these were residents, these were not professionals, don’t know what their careers were, but they were as prepared as anybody I’ve ever been in front of,” Snow said.

He recalled that he met three times with Roden-Lucero and other EPISO members.

“The fourth time he called me and said, ‘Look, we want to come in and present.’ And I said, no, I’ll give you the money if you don’t present,” Snow said with a laugh. He went on to serve on the board of Project ARRIBA.



Rev. Ed Roden-Lucero, right, and other board members celebrated the graduation of the Project ARRIBA class in 2017. (Photo courtesy of Project ARRIBA)

Les Parker, then the CEO of Bank of the West (now WestStar Bank) came up with the name Project Arriba, which roughly translates to “upward” in English, Roden-Lucero recalled. The group then set about reverse engineering an acronym to fit the name, eventually settling on “Advanced Retraining & Redevelopment Initiative in Border Areas.”

With investment from the private sector, Project ARRIBA began in December 1998. Leaders reached out to city and county governments to provide additional funding, where they often met stiff resistance.

Government funding has ebbed and flowed over the years, though the city and county governments have been supportive of ARRIBA funding in recent years. The fight over government funding for Project ARRIBA resulted in some of Roden-Lucero's most significant clashes with elected leaders.

One year, then-County Judge Veronica Escobar explained that she was trying to balance Project ARRIBA's funding request with other needs, including raising wages for some of the county government's lowest-paid employees, recalled Eloiso DeAvila, husband of Dolores DeAvila and a longtime EPISO member.

"And Ed said, well, let them come and apply to Project ARRIBA, too. It wasn't the thing to say," he said.

It was an example of Roden-Lucero allowing his passion to create conflict with possible allies, Eloiso DeAvila said.

"Every fiber of his being was about equity, about social justice. ... I don't want to say to the detriment of whatever it is that we were fighting for, but he would rub people the wrong way," he said.

In its two decades of existence, Project ARRIBA has graduated about 1,400 people. Participants gain certifications or degrees from El Paso Community College and the University of Texas at El Paso.

In addition to education and skills training, Project ARRIBA provides participants with access to child care and economic support as they pursue their education. Graduates are placed in jobs that pay at least \$14 an hour, many of them in health-care occupations.

About 1,400 people have graduated from the program since its inception. Graduates placed in jobs in 2018 earned more than \$49,000 on average, or more than \$23 an hour, according to the organization. El Paso's median household income is about \$42,000 a year.

"I think probably what we didn't know when we were starting out, but kind of learned as we went along, is the impact of ARRIBA beyond the financial part of it," Roden-Lucero said. "You know, we thought, well, yes, we're raising people out of poverty, that's pretty obvious on the statistical part. But it's been wondrous to see what that has done for people in their family life and their personal lives."

The future

Roden-Lucero was born June 29, 1955, in Chicago to a woman from Albuquerque. He was adopted at age 2 by Jim and Anna Roden in Albuquerque; his hyphenated last name honors the parents who raised him and the mother who gave birth to him.

In his early years in El Paso, Roden-Lucero was able to frequently return to Albuquerque to visit his family, thanks to regular direct flights from Southwest Airlines. But those flights ended, and it became more challenging to visit his family.



Rev. Ed Roden-Lucero recalls some of the challenges he faced while advocating for water in poor, rural El Paso County neighborhoods in the 1980s. (Corrie Boudreaux/El Paso Matters)

On Christmas Eve 2020, a nephew sent Roden-Lucero photos of a New Mexico tradition — families decorating the graves of loved ones with luminarias. Among the graves were those of Jim and Anna Roden. Roden-Lucero said he decided it would be the last Christmas he wouldn't be home to participate in the tradition.

Earlier this year, he arranged a transfer from the El Paso Diocese to the Santa Fe Archdiocese. The El Paso diocese announced Roden-Lucero's departure last week in a news release outlining several pastoral changes. He'll begin his role at his new Albuquerque parish in mid-July, after taking a few weeks off.

"We are happy that he's leaving to family, but it's sad that he's leaving because people will be missing him in the work," Dolores DeAvila said.

“He was such a champion for the cause,” Eloiso DeAvila said.

Snow said “nobody really has a clue of how many people that he helped in this community.”

“I can say that he was always focused on doing what was right for those that he served. But in the end, El Paso’s a much better place because of Father Ed,” Snow said.

When asked what issues he’d be tackling if he was a young priest just arriving in El Paso, Roden-Lucero pointed to poverty and racism.

“People have to imagine what would the economy be like if poverty was 5%? What would we have as a city? And I don’t know if people in high places imagine that,” he said. “I think they just kind of take the poverty rate as a given.”

Roden-Lucero also believes El Paso suffers from a subtle anti-Mexican racism and reluctance to embrace El Paso’s Mexican and Indigenous roots. “I don’t see a commitment to celebrate the culture,” he said.

In his final Sunday homily at St. Thomas Aquinas, the day before Memorial Day, Roden-Lucero left his congregation and El Paso with a simple message.

“Today, I encourage us to pray for peace. We have many parishioners that have sons and daughters and relatives in the armed forces, so pray for their safety,” he said. “And to renew our commitment to recognize the dignity of every person and to do our part to alleviate the suffering of others, especially the poor and victims of hate.”

Cover photo: Rev. Ed Roden-Lucero closes the door to the sacristy at St. Thomas Aquinas Church as he prepares to begin his final Sunday Mass with this parish. (Corrie Boudreaux/El Paso Matters)

Correction: Waterborne infections cause hepatitis A. An earlier version incorrectly listed the disease as hepatitis B.