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CONEXIÓN AMÉRICAS CO-FOUNDER & EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR RENATA SOTO STEPPING DOWN NEXT YEAR

Board Commences National Search to Find New Leader

Nashville, TN – Conexión Américas co-founder and Executive Director **Renata Soto** announced Friday her plans to step down May 31, 2019 after nearly 17 years of running the organization. Under her leadership, Conexión Américas has grown from a startup with just three employees in 2002 to one of Nashville’s most respected nonprofits and a leading force in the Middle Tennessee region, the state, and the nation.

“Renata has provided extraordinary leadership for Conexión Américas from the beginning. She had a vision for Nashville as a place in which Latino individuals and families could contribute and thrive, and she made it a reality,” said **Terry Maroney**, chair of the Conexión Américas Board of Directors. “Her uncanny talent for bringing people together behind that vision has served our city and the Latino community well, and has made Conexión Américas a national thought leader.”

Under Soto’s leadership, Conexión Américas has flourished into a \$5M operation with 50 employees dedicated to supporting thousands of immigrant families as they pursue their American dream. The signal achievement of her tenure is the creation of Casa Azafrán, a nonprofit collaborative and gathering place for the immigrant, refugee and broader communities that has become the de facto gateway to Nashville’s International District. Opened in 2012, the 28,000 square foot facility located on Nolensville Pike represented an unprecedented \$6M public and private investment in Nashville’s most ethnically diverse neighborhood. It houses both Conexión Américas and a variety of partner nonprofits that offer legal, health-care, and advocacy services, entrepreneurship support and arts programming. The Casa Azafrán footprint continues to grow with the addition of a Metro Nashville Public Schools preschool, and the fall 2018 opening of Azafrán Park – a \$2.6M public park in the area of Davidson County with the fewest green spaces.

Soto – named the 2013 Nashvillian of the Year by the *Nashville Scene* – has made her mark beyond Tennessee. In 2015, she was elected Chair of the Board of UnidosUS, the nation’s largest Latino civil rights and advocacy organization, and now serves as Immediate Past Chair. Soto’s advocacy also has reached beyond the Latino community. In addition to championing the advancement of the many immigrant and refugee populations that contribute to our state’s rich diversity, she helped form the Tennessee Educational Equity Coalition, a statewide group advocating for the educational needs of all students of color, and conceived the Mosaic Fellowship, which connects and supports leaders of color across the state.

“The last 17 years have been the opportunity of a lifetime. We have brought together the immigrant

and broader communities to uphold the promise of a welcoming nation that celebrates the roots and possibilities of all its people. I'm excited to see my beloved Conexión Américas continue that journey as it writes its next chapter," said Soto. "There is a saying that 'every end is a new beginning.' Today is indeed that – the beginning of the next something great – for both Conexión Américas and for me."

Soto has said that while she is stepping down from Conexión Américas, her commitment to Nashville, to building an inclusive community, and – in particular – to cultivating the next generation of leaders of color, is far from over. While she will take a break once her Conexión Américas tenure is complete in May, she intends to remain engaged with those issues in new and different ways.

Conexión Américas' co-founder, **José González**, will continue his service to the organization and will be part of the search committee to find a new Executive Director.

"When Renata, María Clara Mejía, and I founded this organization 17 years ago, we had nothing more than an idea of what was possible. I'm so proud of what we've built and so excited for my friend, Renata, as she starts to think about her next mountain to climb. When she first shared with me her desire to step down, I promised to do all I could to ensure that the transition was smooth and that, as we looked to the organization's future, we stayed true to our beginnings."

The search committee will be chaired by **Rob Jack**, a long-time Conexión Américas Board member and its current vice chair. In addition to Jack and González, the search committee will also include Board Chair, Terry Maroney, and other key stakeholders. The Board has already retained Koya Leadership Partners as the search firm to lead recruitment efforts, which will commence in January.

"Renata has worked diligently to make sure the organization is ready for this leadership change. We have been collaborating closely with her to create the framework for a seamless transition, and we will continue to do so," said Jack. "We intend to find the very best talent the country has to offer, in order to guarantee that Conexión Américas continues and expands upon its track record of success."

A video message from Soto about this announcement can be found at www.conexionamericas.org/transition.

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Conexión Américas is a Nashville-based nonprofit organization established in 2002. Its mission is to build a welcoming community and create opportunities where Latino families can belong, contribute and succeed. Every year, Conexión Américas assists more than 8,000 individuals and their families in their desire to start businesses, buy homes, improve their English, help their children succeed in school and go to college, and become an integral part of Nashville's social, cultural and economic vitality. Conexión Américas is the lead partner of Casa Azafrán, a nonprofit collaborative at the gateway to Nashville's International District that is home to Conexión Américas and nine partners. To learn more, visit www.conexionamericas.org.

WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING

“A big part of Nashville’s success is the diversity of its people and the will of the community to leverage that as a unifier, not a divider. Conexión Américas has played a critical role in ensuring that. We owe a debt of gratitude as a city and community to Renata for her leadership in setting Nashville on that path. I am excited to see where Conexión goes from here, and I am confident they will continue to play a pivotal role in shaping the city.”

-David Briley, Mayor of Nashville

“Conexión Américas was just getting off the ground when Renata and José approached us for support in 2002. We saw it as an idea whose time had come. We provided early funding in hopes the agency would find its footing. It has succeeded beyond our wildest dreams.”

-Peter F. Bird Jr., President of The Frist Foundation

“I have known Renata since the early 2000’s. As her representative in Congress and now her friend, I have seen firsthand her effectiveness and high integrity. She has become one of the most powerful voices helping policy makers, civic leaders and everyday Tennesseans better understand local immigrant communities. I have also personally witnessed Renata’s ability to bring together people of different political affiliations with a unifying message. In a polarizing political environment, she has a special gift for attracting diverse supporters to her cause. Conexión Américas is a Nashville and Tennessee institution that will continue to flourish thanks to the strong foundation she has built.”

-Rep. Jim Cooper, US Congressman representing Tennessee’s 5th District

“With Renata’s leadership, Conexión Américas has grown into a respected and transformative organization meeting the ever-changing environment impacting immigrants and the host community with courage. However, her greatest achievement might be recruiting such great talent to Conexión so that they won’t miss a beat as she departs. Conexión is fully equipped to continue its pivotal role in changing Nashville’s conversation about immigration as, together, we build a welcoming community and create opportunities for Latino families. ¡Hasta luego mi amiga! Gracias por todo y que dios te bendiga.”

-Kaki Friskics-Warren, Executive Director of the Maddox Charitable Trust and former Conexión Américas Board member

“I have known Renata as a colleague and a friend for more than ten years. Since Conexión Américas became an Affiliate of UnidosUS, Renata has been a valued partner, giving generously of her time and counsel not only to me and UnidosUS but also to her fellow Affiliates, nearly 300 community-based organizations which together serve millions of Hispanics and other Americans every day. It is why she was unanimously elected to serve as our dynamic and committed Chair of our Board of Directors for three years. I can’t wait to see where the next chapter of her life takes her, but I know she will continue to be an advocate for the people she has dedicated her life to help. While Renata steps down from her role, we know that her legacy is that Conexión Américas will continue to thrive and be one of the most admired and effective community organizations in our network.”

-Janet Murguía, President and CEO of UnidosUS, the largest national Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization in the United States