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A central artery of Houston Hispanic life

Ben Mendez connects members of the community

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As he made his way through Magic Island to the venue's Palace of Tutankhamun theater, businessman Ben Mendez worked the crowd of 370 people who gathered there for his monthly National Hispanic Professional Organization mixer.



MATCHMAKER: Ben Mendez prides himself on being a networker.

"Hi, do you know ... ?" Mendez would ask, constantly making introductions for bankers, insurance agents and other business people.

Through his networking organization that went national on Jan. 1 and a Web site he runs, Houston Calendar, Mendez has tailored himself to be the Houston Hispanic community's matchmaker. He introduces employers and employees and brings together buyers and sellers. Latinos frequently call on him when they need to find a job, plan an event or make a sale.

"I'm a deal-maker," said Mendez, 38, whose three-year-old networking organization regularly draws throngs of local Hispanic movers and shakers for its mixers, breakfasts and galas. It will expand to 13 chapters nationwide through March.

Mendez now serves as the national president of the organization, which connects professionals as opposed to the Houston Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, which focuses on businesses, he said.

His Web site listing Latino events receives 40,000 hits a month. His Heights-area company, PMG Project Management Group, has contracts with the city, the Metropolitan Transit Authority and Houston Community College. And he's involved in a wide range of interests, including building a northwest Houston subdivision to serving on the board of Aquila Bancorporation, a Hispanic-owned bank that has stalled as its executives seek investors.

Although his title is president of a design and construction management firm he founded, Mendez spends much of his time making connections for others.

"People think I'm a resource of information for just about everything," Mendez said recently in his office, where supersized jars of cherries and olives sat on a table. He was negotiating a sale of these cocktail garnishes for a purveyor to a food service company.

"Ben is the Yellow Pages in the Hispanic community," said Sally Morin, who is launching a statewide chapter of Hispanic Women Networking of Texas in Houston.



From the outside

In Houston, where many Hispanic power brokers were raised in the predominantly Hispanic inner-city neighborhoods of the East End or Northside, Mendez could easily be seen as an outsider.

He now lives in Pearland but was born in Fort Wayne, Ind., and raised in the border city of McAllen. He moved to Houston in 1987 when he enrolled in Houston Community College.

It was at the community college that he met former Hispanic political power broker Ben Reyes, who delivered a speech on campus.

"He came to work for me as a real young man," Reyes said. "He pulled himself up by his boot straps."

Although Mendez has not worked for Reyes in more than 13 years, he still refers to Reyes as his mentor. He learned the importance of such connections under the tutelage of Reyes.

"I think it goes way back to my days working with Ben Reyes. Ben knew a lot of people," he said. "Those relationships have carried forward to where I am today."

Helping all of Houston

Mendez is connected not only in the Hispanic community but across Houston. After Hurricane Katrina hit and the city needed help creating a database of all the evacuees and helping to find housing for them, PMG was one of the companies officials turned to for help.

"He's a person that if you give him a task, within 24 hours he met those deadlines, always," said Issa Dadoush, director of the city's building service department. "I used to get e-mails from him at 3 o'clock in the morning."

And when Rick Reyes, vice chair of communications for the Texas Association of Mexican-American Chambers of Commerce, needed volunteers for the annual state convention held in Houston in 2005, he called on Mendez.

"He was able to bring together immediately over 100 people to volunteer," Rick Reyes said. "He sent out an e-mail and gave me a list within a day and said, 'Here you are.' It was very impressive."

Mendez acknowledges that such a Rolodex of contacts will benefit him when he runs for office again. He ran unsuccessfully in 1992 and 1998 for state representative but said he didn't have enough money.

"I know it will happen one day," Mendez said. "It's not a priority now."

His supporters agree that Mendez will eventually transfer his business and networking skills to the political arena.

"Ben is very politically savvy," said Saul Valentin, who took over as president of the local chapter of the networking organization this month. "One day it's going to be his turn, I guess."