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Aliseda says adios to job on parole board

by Gary Kent

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One of Beeville's most well-known attorneys and political figures has put his shingle back on the door of his office at 701 E. Houston St.

José Aliseda, former county attorney and county judge, has left the position he has held for the last five years and four months as a member of the Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles.

"Nothing I ever did before gave me a clue of what I'd have to do in this job,"

Aliseda said as he sat behind his desk this week.

Instead of sitting in on parole hearings at Texas prisons and interviewing inmates up for parole, Aliseda said he ended up sitting at a desk, reading reports and making about 350 parole decisions a week.

"I expected something like you saw on 'Shawshank Redemption'," Aliseda said.

But the Texas Department of Criminal Justice is one of the largest prison systems in the world with 152,000 inmates.

"If I made contact with 5 percent of the cases I made decisions about, offenders, family or attorneys, it was a pretty good week."

Aliseda was appointed to the position in 2004 by Gov. Rick Perry. He technically still holds the position, pending the confirmation of his replacement.

For most of that time, he traveled between an office in San Antonio and the three TDCJ prison units in Bee County.

Aliseda described the parole job as "primarily a desk review. The most primary thing on my mind is public safety."

"I have to consider what the victims want, the community. Has the offender rehabilitated? Has he done enough time for what he did?"

The job involves more than deciding whether to grant parole for an offender. Other considerations include revocation of parole and modification of the conditions of a parole.

"There are 19 of us scattered around the state," Aliseda said. But he was one of only seven actual board members, the people who set policy and decide on death penalty cases and sex offender cases.

The other 12 parole commissioners basically have the same duties but they do not set policy. Aliseda said only two of the board members are attorneys, including himself. The others come from all walks of life.

Board members like Aliseda make decisions on what he calls “extraordinary cases.”

Those include capital offenders and child molesters. During Aliseda’s term on the board, he said he made recommendations on 108 death penalty cases.

“A lot of people think a parole board can stop an execution but we can’t. The governor makes the ultimate decision.”

Aliseda said he made important decisions on almost 100,000 cases in the last five years. “Each one of those decisions had a direct effect on an offender and his family members. But each decision also had an effect on public safety and the taxpayers.”

The experience also made Aliseda a believer in the state’s parole system.

“Without parole the whole system would collapse,” he said. “It’s a safety valve for the prison system. If each offender were made to serve his entire sentence, the state wouldn’t be able to afford it.”

Aliseda said prison officials can see the difference in the behavior of offenders who have a possibility for parole and those who do not have that hope. Offenders who know they have no chance at release have nothing to lose by breaking the rules.

The job also has given Aliseda “a new respect for the difficult job that correctional officers have. They deal day in and day out with people who have little regard for human life or who have normal human values.”

“Frankly, I don’t think the public appreciates them enough or pays them enough,” he said of the officers who wear the gray uniforms.

“To me, it’s tragic that people have to be watched and treated like babies. There is a difference between an offender who makes a mistake and one who is incorrigible. And that is my job, to weed out those who deserve a chance and those who do not.”

“I am not leaving the job because it was not an honor to serve the people of Texas and Gov. Perry,” Aliseda said. “I’m leaving because I’ve made enough of those decisions.”

Aliseda officially opened his office on May 1. “I want to go back to a part of my life I’ve missed for the past five years and four months. I still like courtroom work.”

The attorney said he wants to concentrate on the same types of cases he worked before, criminal cases, family law and general practice. He is also interested in taking some cases in the growing field of immigration law.

Aliseda is no newcomer to Bee County. Born in Mexico to Dr. José Aliseda Sr., MD, and wife Laura, the attorney moved to Chicago with his parents before he started school.

His parents live in McAllen where his brother, Ernest, is a former district judge and an attorney. His sister, Laura Aliseda Powell, is a computer programmer in Austin.

Aliseda graduated from McAllen High School in 1974, attended Pan American University in the late 1970s and earned a bachelor of arts degree from the University of Texas at Austin before graduating from the UT School of Law in 1981.

He immediately joined the United States Navy as a commissioned officer in the Judge Advocate General's Office and was a Navy attorney when he was assigned to the Chase Field Naval Air Station.

The attorney opened his practice in Beeville in 1986 after deciding that he liked the community and life in a small South Texas town.

He was elected county attorney in 1988 and held that position until 1996. He was elected county judge in 1999 and remained in that position until 2003.

Aliseda and his wife, Ida, live on their ranch northwest of Beeville. Their sons, Mark and Louie, are in the U.S. Army and their daughter, Valerie Villarreal Galvan, lives in Beeville with her family.

"People have asked me where I am now," Aliseda said. "I never really left Beeville, even when I was working for a year in Palestine. I learned to fly so I could come to Beeville on weekends."

But the parole board job kept him so busy that he was not often seen in public here.

All that is changing. Look for a familiar face to appear in the courtrooms here again.

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