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Manny Gonzales says he had a vision when he was a 6-year-old boy growing up in the South Valley.

"I was in catechism and I saw myself as a leader. I saw myself as someone who helped and protected people," Gonzales said in an interview with the Journal last week.

The vision became reality last month when the Bernalillo County Commission appointed Gonzales sheriff. The 46-year-old has spent most of his adult life in law enforcement: At 18, he joined the Marine Corps, and two years after an honorable discharge in 1987, he went to work as a deputy for the Bernalillo County Sheriff's Office.

For the past 20 years, he has had virtually every assignment in the department-including SWAT, crimes against children, coordinating a rescue operation in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina and, most recently, reaching the rank of captain and overseeing a comprehensive sex offender registry.

Chief Deputy David Linthicum said much of Gonzales' strength as a leader comes from his diverse experience.

"He has that institutional knowledge that's just invaluable," said Linthicum, who has known Gonzales his whole career at the sheriff's office. "He's very well-rounded. He has been assigned to many different areas of the department as a field deputy and as a supervisor. That experience is a real strength that he can and will draw on.

"His ties to the community are also a real asset. He grew up here, and he wants to make this a better, safer place to live. It's not a show. He's serious about being sheriff."

He said the rank and file are pleased with Gonzales' appointment because, for the first time

in recent memory, someone from within the sheriff's office is now leading it. "

He does know the department and the people here," Linthicum said. "He knows other peoples' histories, their strengths, and he will surround himself with people who will help him do a good job." ·

Gonzales replaces Darren White as the county's top law enforcement official. White took a job as Mayor Richard Berry's public safety director.

Gonzales plans to run for a full term as sheriff in November.

He inherits a department that has been for the most part scandal-free in recent years and that many describe as a smooth-run-ning operation.

But that doesn't mean there won't be challenges.

Budget shortages, Gonzales said, could put a strain on staff - both sworn and civilian.

The department currently has 270 deputies, he said.

"By population, yes, we would need more deputies," Gonzales said. "But there's an economic crisis right now, and (the commission) is asking us to look at reducing the budget."

One of his priorities, Gonzales said, will be to get information to people on crime trends and prevention before they become victims.

Gonzales said his style will differ from that of White, who never shied away from the spotlight. Gonzales said he wants to spend time face to face with members of the community.

My idea is to focus back on the people," he said. "You will have more effective law enforcement if you do that. I want less emphasis on myself. Instead, I want to reach out to the school leaders, the neighborhood leaders, the people who deal with at-risk youth and ask them how this department can better serve them."