

# Q&As

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS



## STEVEN KHUONG

CHIEF EXECUTIVE,  
CURACUBBY

By Sara Sanchez / El Paso Inc.  
Photos provided by Steven Khuong

**H**alf a year into the coronavirus pandemic, it's clear that tech tools and apps are helping us hold on to some sense of normalcy in the face of a year that is anything but.

At Curacubby, the team's mission is to make it easier for schools and other education or child care-related businesses to manage accounts, which can mean one less headache in a new world of social distancing and the upending of the school year.

Curacubby opened an El Paso office in 2018, and now has a team of 12 in the city, all from El Paso. Steven Khuong, CEO of Curacubby, said he wanted to bring more opportunities for El Paso's talented computer science professionals and others interested in entrepreneurship and startups.

"Our operations manager, she was in Austin and moved back here," Khuong said. "Even though the talent sometimes may leave the city, it seems there's always a strong desire to come back. That's a common theme I'm seeing. We're fortunate to be able to provide opportunities for folks to come."

The startup's software platform includes touchless check-in, online business tools and payment processing for schools, day cares and other organizations.

Curacubby is one of just a handful of startups that have found a home in El Paso, and Khuong said he hopes more can make their way down here from the tech center of Silicon Valley.

Khuong started Curacubby in 2016 but didn't have the traditional path into the startup world.

He grew up in Oakland, California, from an immigrant family and helped found a preschool for children with autism, which led him to create Curacubby. He received his bachelor's degree from the University of California at Berkeley.

"What really resonates for me, when I think about business, is people," Khuong said. "You can have the best idea in the world, the best investment and playbooks, but if the people that are working with you do not embody the same energy you have, that synergy is not going to be there."

Khuong recently spoke to El Paso Inc. by phone. He talked about the startup's experience during COVID-19 and what about El Paso attracted Curacubby to the city.

— Continued on 19A

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## Khuong

Continued from 18A

### Q: How's it going and what's new at Curacubby?

Deep down in my heart, I love El Paso. I'm not sure if it's fate that brought me here, but there are amazing people in El Paso and that has positively impacted my life.

My most serene memory prior to COVID was taking a drive through the Franklin Mountains. I knew I was in the right place. There's something very powerful about balance that resonates deeply with me.

I'm bringing this up because, particularly in these unprecedented times, a startup like ours needs to be grounded so that we're conscientious and calm when we're making decisions. The people and culture have really given us that. So when you ask how things are going, that's how I'm feeling.

### Q: How has your business shifted with COVID?

For example, prior to COVID, we've always had this value proposition to our customers that we can eliminate some of their laborious back-office processes, we can bring payment technology. But that's all taken a back seat to what they deemed as more important, such as the educational aspects of the school business.

Now, the awareness of having touchless tech, online payments, mobile wallets, that awareness is there now. We don't have to convince our customers – they're coming to us.

One hundred percent of our customers came back to say how it's saving their business. In a sense, COVID is a horrible thing that's happening. At the same time, the silver lining is that we've become more connected to our customers as a result.

### Q: Are you seeing demand for any one service from Curacubby?

Because of the wide spectrum of customers we service – preschools and elementary and high schools, after school programs, summer camps – we're finding that different segments of cus-

tomers are needing or prioritizing different technologies.

At the preschool level, there's this urgency to drive anything that's contactless. Preschools, prior to COVID, were administering check-ins with a piece of paper and pen. In those cases, our touchless check-in technology has been in the largest demand.

Payment technology seems to be in high demand. Before, it was cash or a written check, now everyone's asking for mobile payments.

### Q: What's your valuation?

The number we look at is total payment volume, or TPV. Over the last three years, we've gone over \$350 million in TPV. That's a really nice number for us as a startup. Our objective is to get over the \$1 billion TPV, which was looking really good prior to COVID.

We're optimistic. The team in El Paso is putting in an effort every day to help us get to those goals.

Plus, we're looking to hire. If you are of an entrepreneurial spirit, looking to join a startup, we want to talk to you.

### Q: Talk about your partnership with UTEP and Ann Quiroz Gates, chair of the Computer Science Department.

We reached out earlier this year to assess a potential partnership where we can sponsor various students from the computer science program, into a program we're developing that will help them utilize their coding skills but also pull them into an entrepreneurial environment.

We can do certain things that a Fortune 500 company won't be able to do. For example, we hired an intern this week from UTEP, who will be graduating this semester. But her background wasn't necessarily always in computer science. She worked in the fashion industry and was a blogger. All this creative energy is innate in her.

It was like magic, a perfect fit. We wholeheartedly agreed that more opportunities need to be created for computer science to put them in entrepreneurial positions – not just seeing them as coders, but seeing how a startup works on the business side

as well.

### Q: What are the computer science jobs like in El Paso?

The talent in El Paso is amazing. The computer science program at UTEP is amazing. When I look at the opportunities, compared to the level and talent coming out of UTEP, I think there's some disparity. There's a lot of potential for more startups to embark on the mission of coming to El Paso, helping cement this foundation so that these brilliant students won't have to go to Austin or Dallas or Houston.

I would love to see more startups come to El Paso, to even out the distribution between talent and opportunity.

### Q: What will it take for more Silicon Valley companies and startups to notice El Paso?

Silicon Valley companies have an opportunity to do a better job of representing the brilliance of El Paso. For myself, I was made aware of El Paso from Fivestars, which came to El Paso a couple of years before we did.

It's all about paying it forward. There's a great responsibility on Curacubby, and any company, to really represent the truth. There's so much brilliance and opportunity for us to help flourish the community with this startup environment. I would put the onus on us.

### Q: How's your study on the state of child care and its economic impact going? When will that be ready?

Curacubby, and Californians for Quality Early Learning, commissioned the largest study on the state of child care and the economic impact. There are over 300 service providers that, on any given day, put out services to more than 30,000 children. We're finding some grim outlooks.

For example, it's a critical enabler of working parents, to work and raise a family at the same time. An already limited child care market pre-pandemic kept 2 million parents home annually.

Our findings quantify what is actually happening in this country. It's also going to provide for what we think it's going to take for this country to recover,

with early child education as the catalyst.

We expect the study to be coming out very shortly. We're working with our content team.

### Q: What's your perspective on the state of child care in El Paso?

There are amazing preschools and early education providers in El Paso. Currently, most are operating at just a certain percentage of their capacity, under 50%. El Paso is doing the right thing by looking at their COVID cases on a daily basis and making adjustments.

The numbers are looking positive. We're working closely with customers to enable them to speed up or ramp up opening processes, if local governments give the green light.

### Q: How's it been having Curacubby in El Paso? How many employees do you have here?

We had anticipated adding 40 in El Paso right when COVID hit. We kinda had to stop hiring across all our teams. In El Paso, I think we're close to 12, but we're actively hiring.

### Q: Do you have any future plans to expand services outside of the education realm?

The platform currently will service any organization that provides a family architecture, thereby children are receiving services and there's a guardian or parental aspect to that.

I know soccer is a big thing; soccer clubs can use the app more easily. We haven't marketed to those particular customer markets, but for sure there are many peripheral segments or adjacencies.

### Q: Why did you choose El Paso for a Curacubby office?

Prior to COVID, there had been a massive issue in Silicon Valley with the potential to grow – limitations in space, and also limitations in talent. In late 2018, we were encouraged to look at other cities where we could potentially grow a satellite office. We visited a number of options.

Ultimately, what really put us over the top was our visit to El Paso. As soon as we touched down, there was just a genuine sense of community here we

didn't find anywhere else. There was also this notion that there were really people in El Paso that could benefit from a tech startup opportunity.

No other city had those two components. It's the best thing we've done. We've built a home here. The employees are like family.

### Q: What was your path to creating Curacubby?

I grew up primarily in Black and African American neighborhoods. Being a person of Chinese descent, there's often a lot of discrimination. In order for me to assimilate, I wanted to do something that would help me blend in well.

I fell in love with hip hop and taught myself how to DJ and scratch. At 12 years old, I was doing school dances. By the time I was 16, I started producing music and started a record label. I used that money to put myself through college.

When I was 12, I was paralyzed. Being a young adolescent male and being paralyzed, it's a really depressing feeling. I hid in ROTC so I wouldn't have to jump into a P.E. uniform.

Eventually I was able to walk, but there was a high school teacher, Ms. Nielsen, that really taught me everything about fitness.

I started my first company, in tech recruiting, until the dot-com boom went bust. At that point, I decided to go back to what I really loved, fitness, so I started a fitness company.

I would still be in that business if it wasn't for the fact that my son, now 13, was diagnosed with autism when he was 3. We couldn't find any appropriate services for him where we lived. Ultimately we got together with other families where we founded a preschool for children with autism, in a church room.

As that preschool grew, we really experienced a lot of difficulty with managing the operations of that school. That was the beginning of Curacubby.

We were confident in our educational curriculum, but we knew an organization can't survive without efficient operations. We built the product. Other schools found out about it, asked to beta test, and we leveraged that.

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