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Message from the Chairman of the Board



Hector M. Flores
Chair
Dallas ISD Retiree
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Dear Conference 2023 Attendees and Guests,

Welcome to your moment of opportunity and transformation made possible because you have already taken that essential first step of joining us today. This event has been prepared just for you to charge you up, provide invaluable information, and allow you to network with other extremely talented, dedicated, and forward-thinking leaders in their fields. I am sure you will benefit from this experience, so enjoy it.

The SER Jobs for Progress National board of directors, our organization's staff, and our great SER Network of Affiliates work together daily to ensure that the promise of possibilities and the potential of every person to excel is being nurtured. Also, we recognize that starting a small business or embarking on a new trade or professional career requires mentors with the right expertise and the tangible tools needed to do the job. This is why we're here, and I invite you to tap into our resources fully.

Growing up in a small South Texas town, I learned early the importance of family, friends, and community that provide our first role models, instill *ganas* in our souls, and prepare us for the ups and downs of life. Likewise, La Familia de SER is your family

as you prepare to embark on or continue your journey toward achieving the peak of your purpose in whatever endeavor you choose. Even if you don't have all the answers yet, just get started in the right direction, and we will reach the destination together. The key is to begin.

I want to recommend that you meet as many people as possible at this conference. Listen closely to the ideas and experiences others bring to the workshops, and freely share your thoughts, ask questions, or simply introduce yourself. Believe me, we have all done it, and I still do at every opportunity. You will discover that many others are feeling just like you, hoping to make those critical connections and leaving here better prepared for their next phase. As we say back home, *todo se puede*, everything's possible, so let's get going!

Sincerely,

Hector Flores
Chair, SER National

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Message from the President and CEO



Ignacio Salazar
President & CEO
SER Jobs for Progress
National, Inc.

Dear Familia de SER and Guests,

Please accept my personal and warmest welcome, along with that of our entire board of directors and staff, to the 59th Annual SER Conference, Creating Gateways to Economic Equity. You are the catalyst that is making 2023 a record-setting year for job growth and optimism for the future.

It is exciting to see the more than a million people a year across the United States and Puerto Rico who are finding their unique gateway to economic equity at one of the more than 200 locations operated by the SER Network of Affiliates. Today, AI is the language of tomorrow, and never before has the opportunity been more significant to tap into the workforce development opportunities of future technologies, services, and programs. Our participants are ready to compete, and we are ready to assist them achieve their goals every day.

This conference is incredibly proud to highlight the triumphs of Latinas and other women of color who are finding or making their gateways in virtually every business area, including services, products, and consulting. Their achievements are amazing stories of talent, sacrifice, and determination; all mixed into creating that powerful formula we call success. SER Jobs for Progress National, Inc. (SER National) is nurturing a new generation of leaders. They are building today's generation of dreamers, and nothing is holding them back!

From coast-to-coast, 2023 continues the legacy of training and opportunities that surpass every imaginable expectation. Under three main pillars—EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT, and EMPOWERMENT, La Familia de SER continues providing services. Numbers alone cannot tell the transformational stories of the men and women whose lives are being impacted for their generation and their families yet ahead.

SER National is advancing, too, given our recent logo refresh that speaks to the future and a new way to message who we are and what we do. Rest assured that behind that new look is still the experienced, dedicated corporate SER team. Equally important is our outstanding SER Network of Affiliates, comprised of professionals committed to your success.

I am proud to stand with them and promise you that we are here with a servant heart to open the door, encourage you to enter, and work together for your future. May this conference create a lasting memory as part of your journey to your most outstanding achievements.

Sincerely,

Ignacio Salazar
President and Chief Executive Officer

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SER National Affiliates

Providing Pathways to Success

Walk into the two Detroit at Work Career Centers or the American Job Centers anywhere in the United States, and you have entered the world of SERCO, a for-profit, multi-faceted, rapidly growing, and dynamic workforce training and services company created by SER Metro-Detroit Jobs for Progress, Inc. (SER Metro-Detroit).

“We’re the only agency that operates two centers for the City of Detroit,” says Veronica Sanchez Peavey, Sr. Assistant Vice President for Adult Programming Services and Regional Director for SER Metro-Detroit and SERCO.

“One center is in a partnership with Goodwill Industries of Greater Detroit, and the other is at our SER Metro-Detroit headquarters on Michigan Avenue. We served more than 11,000 people through the American Job Centers in 2022.

We offer a comprehensive menu of assistance services to individuals seeking employment. Visitors are not required to make an appointment to access a resource room that provides space to work on their resume, apply for employment online, or access information related to workforce

development. As part of the one-stop concept, we house our partners, the State of Michigan Unemployment Insurance Agency, Veteran Affairs, and the Michigan Rehabilitation Services, to help applicants seeking unemployment benefits and those with special needs and provide the required priority of service to our veterans. Add access to workshops, job and career readiness, assessments to evaluate potential training opportunities, math and reading skills testing, and a career coach for intensive, individualized services,

all without charge,” adds Sanchez Peavey. SERCO staff is highly skilled and prepared to develop career plans that align with each participant’s background and experience to create the best fit possible. Also, the process can incorporate career inventory testing that scientifically matches a person’s aptitude to determine the most suitable work or career pathways. The interactive employment preparation processes are supplemented by researching training programs with funding for eligible applicants. The final pathway selection requires that each person visit three training sites to decide which option is best for them.

“For example, if they select training for a Commercial Driver’s License or CDL, the applicant needs to decide which program they can reach as required because access to transportation is a challenge in Detroit,” says Veronica. “We help applicants enroll and connect them to supportive services to do everything we can to ensure their success. This includes providing bus tickets and a gas card if they drive to and from the training site. Also, once they graduate, they will need clothing for their interview, so we will help with that and the appropriate work gear they will need at their job site. We are with the participants throughout this entire process.

Upon graduation, we assist with job placement because we have very strong employer partnerships as a workforce training organization. Employer partners are terrific because they help graduates with their interviewing skills preparation, hopefully resulting in them getting that job. Further, for up to a year, we continue to work with every graduate to help them retain



their jobs. When you add up all of this, training, preparation, and support can span up to two years. Later, they can return if they need other types of assistance. Equally important is when we can help families that our graduates refer to us. Once participants see all we can do for and with them, they trust us to help others in their circle with workforce-related matters. Seeing that is very rewarding because it means we are making a difference,” she adds.

Veronica has been doing this kind of work for twenty years. However, the path that initially brought her to SERCO is a story in itself. She was the first college graduate in her family, having attended the University of Michigan, one of the nation’s renowned Big Ten schools. Growing up in Detroit, Sanchez Peavey says that, like many other young people, she once dreamed of working for one of the big three --- GM, Ford, or Chrysler, perhaps



in HR to “help people.” The challenge was finding a way to explore job opportunities. Since her family did not own a computer at home and traveling to the UM campus

was impractical because of distance, Veronica used a phone book to locate places nearby with free access to computers.

“I found several locations, but every time I went into a lab, people around me inevitably would ask me to help them with their computer searches because they didn’t know how,” she says. “Turns out, I was in what was then called a SER ‘one-stop’ center that helped people looking for employment. When I entered my resume into the state job bank system, the person who would later become my boss and mentor, Manuela Zarate, SER Metro-Detroit Vice-President and COO, called me and asked that I come in for an interview. Admittedly, I also met with two other agencies. However, when I finished my conversation with SER, I knew this was where I wanted to be. She offered me a job straight out of college, and I have been here ever since.

I love this work even though I did not go to college for workforce development or knew what workforce development entailed. I discovered that this work would allow me to do exactly what I wanted to do: helping the community and being involved in business management. This is a community-based organization, but we are also a business and must survive. Because of that, my position exposes me to many different aspects of the organization and has allowed me to grow personally and professionally,” says Veronica.

Sanchez Peavey considers herself fortunate to have started her career under the direction of Zarate, an individual who believed in



mentorship, a trait she says she now works to pay forward. Veronica adds that working under Eva Garza Dewaelsche, SER Metro-Detroit President and CEO, provides additional invaluable opportunities to keep learning daily from two strong Latinas who have excelled in their careers. “What I have witnessed firsthand is how community-minded both of them are, and despite being very prominent, Eva and Manuela continue to actively participate in meetings, share their knowledge, and make enormous contributions to our team at every opportunity,” says Veronica. “It is not often that individuals who have already achieved so much in their lives, still very intentionally and with great respect, reach back and lift others; something I admire and want to do in my role. They have taught me to nurture everyone, whether they are coming in through our doors as customers or as staff. When we can impact the rest of someone’s life, what can be more meaningful than that?” she asks.

The answer may come from what those mentees achieve in their careers or when they return to SER, perhaps after having experienced other

professional opportunities. Sanchez Peavey says sharing talented people who venture into different positions throughout the community amplifies the proverbial win-win, touching many more lives. This chain effect is the true evidence of success at SER Metro-Detroit and SERCO.

Hundreds of miles away, but not far removed from those best practices, Manuel Ugues, Regional Director for SERCO of Texas, Inc., is sharing that same message across one of the nation’s fastest-growing states, with a focus on how what he has to offer will add to the region’s economic success. He crisscrosses a vast territory under his watch. Like Veronica, Manuel says he believes the key to a person’s long-term future is their ability to network and collaborate in what they do daily.

“We are in the people business, and our primary role is to connect workforce development audiences such as employers, job seekers, training providers, and stakeholders to offer them a solution to help elevate their inter-connected ecosystem,” says Ugues. “Each community has its challenges and characteristics. You have urban communities that have one challenge; rural communities have another. For example, we’re talking about the basics in a rural area where interconnectivity may be afforded as a luxury. In contrast, in an urban setting, it’s readily available. This difference may mean that one community does not have access to the latest and best new curriculums because of the lack of broadband access,” adds Manuel.

Ugues says the differences

may be readily evident when assessing skill sets and education levels. Many cities and larger metropolitan areas may have multiple large educational institutions. Manuel says he had easy access to Texas A&I in Kingsville, where he grew up. In rural communities, a moderate or low-income family may not be able to access a university like Texas A&I that affords community members academic resources.

“That type of educational gateway is where it all starts,” says Ugues. “From elementary to high schools, you can begin to identify academic factors that impact local industries and job opportunities and are the overall economic drivers. A good college or university can end up leading an entire community. One example is San Antonio, which has several higher learning institutions feeding into eight core local industries that lift the market and move the needle with significant job opportunities. Those industries include manufacturing, cybersecurity, healthcare, tourism, and many back-office service providers. These sectors allow for economic mobility. You can begin in one job at the entry-level, then progress, perhaps at another company, to a higher level and rewarding economic opportunity that takes you to the next level in your career. This is why at SERCO, we know these situations are not one-size-fits-all, and you cannot just bring up a list and check off a box the same everywhere,” he adds.

Ugues says his role at SERCO has taught him that successful agencies utilize various workforce development and

training tools. He points to Bryan-College Station, where Texas A&M is located, and says the communities benefit from the entrepreneurship of generations of students. These graduates have contributed to the economic growth and well-being of the combined communities and enriched the setting where SERCO can thrive. Manuel knows each region and city in the Texas labor market, which enables him to deliver workforce development and training solutions that align with each location, the same way Sanchez Peavey recognizes there are different solutions for different individuals.

"I have enjoyed being in the people business for more than twenty-five years, a dozen of those with SERCO," says Ugues. "I love what I do because I am at the crossroads of helping people, building communities, and creating financial opportunities and economic stability for our stakeholders every day. I am thrilled to see people empowered with knowledge through information, training, and resources. In my case, I was the first member of my family to go to college. My father was a mechanic who owned a small shop, and my mother worked in the school district. This upbringing provided me with a lens through which I could see my future between where I came from and where I could go. My father taught me how to work in his shop but told me very clearly that was not what he wanted me to do for the rest of my life. This motivated me to explore other career paths and opportunities, and I am glad I did. I bring this to what I do now and can speak from firsthand experience," he adds.

Both Veronica and Manuel exemplify the transformative power of SERCO through every person the agency touches, from customers, to program participants to staff. Each individual contributes something different, and collectively, they are a powerful organization making a difference everywhere they go, from Detroit to Texas. "We're proud of the legacy and continued importance of the mission to which people like Eva, Manuela, and others have devoted their lives," says Veronica. "I am privileged to be here at this time sharing in their achievement and re-committing myself to continuing their work," she adds.

"What I do at SERCO enables me to help

others while also providing for my family, which both my parents did for me through their efforts and sacrifice," says Manuel. "The best I can do every day is honoring their examples and being a role model for my family and the people I serve across Texas."

SERCO is creating opportunities that would not be possible if we were not here, and this gives us purpose at every step, one life at a time. Being recognized for that motivates me even more," says Ugues.





CASA OTOÑAL

HOUSING CORPORATION

135 Sylvan Ave | 203-773-1847  

Creating a Place for Seniors That Honors Their True-Self

Casa Otoñal fulfills the true meaning of feeling at home, safe, secure, and embraced by the people and surroundings that make our lives meaningful. The organization was established in 1976 by congregants of the then St. John's Catholic Church, which drew Latinos to it because the parish served as the only place where Mass was also celebrated in Spanish. In addition, the congregation served free lunches to seniors it bussed in from around the city. "What is beautiful to me is that, it was there, during the act of breaking bread amongst each other, that the idea of Casa Otoñal Senior Housing was born," says Elmer Rivera Bello, Executive Director.

"You have to picture what those encounters must have been like. People from very different backgrounds getting together, affirming trust, and becoming acquainted with one another. Slowly, a realization emerged that Latino seniors needed a place where they could age in place while being their true selves. They wanted to feel en casa, at home, and Casa Otoñal could be that safe, familiar space for them," says Rivera Bello.

Key to that sense of belonging was the notion of "true self," he adds. This phrase refers to the understanding that we each have a way of seeing ourselves, our identity, and our person. Casa Otoñal would be affordable housing that would enable seniors to speak their own language, eat culturally familiar meals, and a setting respectful of the community's celebrations and beliefs, where every person's value mattered.

"What was so amazing was that the church congregants wanted to create this place," says Elmer. "At the time, a predominantly Puerto Rican community needed housing, but they had nowhere to go. There were other developments in the region—for example, one community catered to the Jewish denomination. So, everyone knew a place for the Latino community was possible, but it had to be authentic. Of course, once Casa Otoñal was started, it was apparent that there was abundant opportunity to provide other supportive services to the residents," he adds.

Rivera Bello acknowledges his own family's experience of how as patriarchs and matriarchs age, they want to find a space of their own without the sense of being a burden to their children or extended family. At the same time, Latinos traditionally do not place their elders in senior care facilities or institutions that are essentially boarding facilities away from familiar surroundings and the very things and activities that provide a sense of belonging and purpose in their lives.

"I used to be an altar boy at the church when this whole idea was coming to fruition," says Rivera Bello. "I can remember distinctly my mom telling me, even back then, that when she reached the age where she could apply to live at Casa Otoñal, that is what she wanted to do. She was set on spending her retirement years in that facility. At the time, perhaps I could not understand it fully. However, I can tell you that she carried forth with the idea, and she's been there for almost 20 years. What is most impressive to me is how she feels at home, happy and fulfilled, at Casa Otoñal. And isn't that what all sons, daughters, and extended family want when a loved one says, I want to be part of a community, of my peers if you will. I think most of us could agree that Casa Otoñal and places like it create an extraordinary haven, a refuge, even a sanctuary that feels safe for its residents," he adds.

Rivera Bello says Casa Otoñal also brings to light the need to have a place that fills a gap in the lives of many seniors when they retire. He says many employers do not provide retirement plans that adequately provide for the future needs of their workers once they retire. As a result, they need to find affordable housing in a setting conducive to their mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being.

"I was prepared to take on the responsibility for my mother's care," says Elmer. "Gladly, I was going to take on that financial expense. Yet, when my mother and I had that conversation about what she wanted, she made it very clear that to her, independent living was vital to her sense



of self, and the connection that she wanted to maintain with all her friends, the activities she enjoyed, and the freedom to finally have the time to pick and choose what she wanted to do, and when. Casa Otoñal afforded her all those choices,” he says.

Rivera Bello says his own experience has taught him that the need for Latino seniors in his area is real and growing. “We need to double the footprint of Casa Otoñal in the next five years.

Casa Otoñal’s focus is striking that balance and navigating potential opportunities with municipalities and other partners interested in working with a nonprofit with the track record and experience to deliver. “Our agency knows what our community wants and needs because we contact them directly daily. Casa Otoñal is a trusted, respected organization through the relationships we have established over many years. Our staff of six is wonderful. It is a blend of two generations of community advocates dedicated to the same mission: service to others. I think we are blessed and stronger because of the blend of talent, perspectives, and skills everyone brings to Casa Otoñal daily,” adds Rivera Bello.

Casa Otoñal, while committed to the Latino community, is not exclusively serving only one segment of the population. “I think it’s important that we as Latinos continue to push forward on that mission with which we started but that we don’t make it seem as though we’re exclusive,” says Elmer. “Yes, I come from a marginalized community, and that’s what drives me. However, I want to be on the playing field and impact as many people as possible. I see our work at Casa Otoñal as a small step towards empowering



our community. Most of all, I am committed to ensuring that our seniors are cared for without encroaching upon their independent living goals and preferences,” he adds.

Casa Otoñal is also allowing seniors to connect with local youths in a healthy exchange of support and mentoring. The benefit is for both groups to learn from one another and to enable seniors to continue to feel purposeful and contribute to the next generation’s pool of knowledge. Their wisdom is based upon life lessons they have experienced, and youths can benefit significantly from informal encounters, discussions, and activities.

“Last September, we were doing the Latino Heritage Month at Casa Otoñal, and we had all the residents come down, with representation from many Latin American countries,” recalls Elmer. “There were different types of food, colored faces, different music, the whole

spectrum of diversity that we Latinos create. This is who we are. I witnessed the true reflection of what this nation strives for in our interactions. We seek to tap into that diversity, that beauty, that difference of opinion, and all those things that make us unique and beautiful. That day, as I looked out towards the audience, I was filled with so much joy as we celebrated the diversity of our Latinidad! It was an “aha” moment like so many other times throughout my life. It was a moment that reaffirmed the importance of the work we do around cultural preservation. Together, we can move forward as confident Latinos because we know who we are, where we come from, and what we represent,” adds Rivera Bello.



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SER Jobs for Progress National, Inc.



Serving Latinos Through Knowledge Sharing for 55 Years



The Spanish American Center was founded to provide information, referrals, and advocacy to the Latino community. It is the oldest social services organization, exclusively serving the Latino community in Worcester County, Massachusetts, northwest of Boston. The region has a population of more than 862,000 residents, with an estimated 100,000 Latinos.

“We have been here for fifty-seven years, and we know every program in our region that has services or any type of resources for the Latino community,” says Miguel “Mickey” Guzman, family advocate. “The strength of the Spanish American Center is that we are led by our wonderful Executive Director, Neddy Latimer, an excellent Board of Directors, great staff, and volunteers. For our community, we collaborate with every local agency and governmental program that has something to offer our stakeholders. We are the liaison, the bridge builders who can connect individuals or families who come in daily looking for information,” adds Guzman.

The Spanish American Center’s most prominent service presently is the Domestic Violence Program, run by Domestic Violence Advocates. It focuses on the growing trend of violence within families, intimate partner relationships, and the broader community. The agency provides family support, referral services, and links to 24/7 hotlines to assist individuals in crisis because of domestic violence. The largest group impacted by domestic violence is women ages 18-34. The Centers for Disease Control report that one in three Latinas in the United States has experienced domestic violence, yet these attacks



remain among the least reported by the Latino community.

“When people come in, I am usually the person they will speak with, and my job is to reassure them that they are welcome, safe, and that we care about them,” says Mickey. “Once trust is established, people open up and are willing to tell me what they need, ask questions, or express any issue they think we can help or assist in resolving. In my time here, 27 years, I have connected with people from each of the 20 Spanish-speaking countries in the Americas. That shows you how diverse our community is becoming. Also, the growth of the area’s Brazilian community is compelling the Spanish American Center team to strive to become trilingual so we can assist the Portuguese-speaking population,” he says.

Two other significant offerings of the Spanish American Center are the Food Pantry program and Community Meals to several neighborhoods. Daily food insecurity is an increasing reality, even among working Latinos struggling financially after the pandemic and confronting the effects of inflation. “People have to decide between paying their rent and buying food or getting their medicines and skipping meals,” says Guzman. “What is even more alarming is that some of the people who used to donate to the Spanish American Center’s food pantry program now have to come to us for assistance. This is how acute the problem of food insecurity is in our community. It is heartbreaking,” adds Guzman. The latest statistics show that 21% of households with children in the region served by the Spanish American Center suffer from some level of hunger.

The third primary resource the Spanish American Center provides the Latino community deals with immigration legal services through a referral to two qualified attorneys specializing in this law area. “The Spanish American Center can provide assistance with filling our immigration forms or translating information from correspondence they receive,” says Mickey. “However, if they have legal questions or need legal advice, we refer them to our two legal experts who work independently of our agency,” he adds.

Guzman says the Spanish American Center does not inquire about immigration status and offers services to all individuals requesting it. “We serve anyone regardless of immigration status, and the term illegal is prohibited in our agency because they are not illegals,” says Mickey. “Immigrants are not illegals. There are two kinds of residents: citizen residents and residents who live here. We include everyone as residents who live here, so the change that has happened here is that more people are coming to see us. More people have the courage and the confidence to seek services with us,” says Guzman.

One reason for the higher demand is the significant increase in Latino immigrants traveling to Massachusetts. According to the Immigrant Learning Center, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts is home to 1 million immigrants. This number signifies that one-in-six residents are foreign-born, or 17.6 percent of the population. “The growth in the immigrant population means more people every day are arriving who need our assistance to find out how to access vital services for their families and themselves,” says Mickey. “Since I have been with the Spanish American Center, we have moved four times to new facilities that enable us to help greater numbers of recipients. We have acquired a second site in addition to the building we currently operate, and plans are to expand our capacity. Again, this is because the need is so great,” he adds.

The Spanish American Center also provides English-as-a-second-language (ESL) courses, after-school, summer, and youth programs, services for seniors, voter registration, and a winter coat distribution program, among many other capabilities. “Our goal here is to be a one-stop liaison agency that can direct our clients wherever they need to go,” says Guzman. “We don’t provide housing apartments, we assist with housing forms and protocols, but we know and work with agencies that can help place people who qualify into available, affordable housing. Similarly, we are not an education service provider, but we work with programs that specialize in assisting students who need academic or financial assistance for their education, and so on,” adds Mickey.

For Guzman, his role is more than a job. It is his calling, and he gets quiet and pensive when he recalls recent encounters where a young person may walk in and say, you helped my mom when I was little, and I will never forget what you did. Or others who thank him and the team for past assistance in their darkest hours. “We

are all here to serve every person who comes through our door,” says Mickey. “This is a work of love, and we know what it’s like to need help and feel alone. The Spanish American Center is committed to remaining faithful to our mission. I can’t think of anything else that I, or anyone here, would want to be doing other than the very best we can for every soul. For me, a thank you a day is good enough,” he adds.





4258

Building Families and Futures Through Affordable Housing

For generations, the Westside of San Antonio, Texas, has been the heartbeat of the Mexican American community, the area where Hispanic families four generations deep have raised their children and realized their dreams. It is also one of the nation's first public housing areas, home to its initial "courts" named Alazan Apache, and located one mile west of downtown. The housing project of cinder block buildings with concrete floors was built to return GIs coming home from World War II and added life to an area of primarily modest, wood-framed single-story houses. Often, these casitas were smaller than half the space of an 18-wheel trailer. Yet, families prospered on the Westside along either side of streets named Guadalupe, El Paso, and Commerce. These traffic arteries led to growth into the then less populated areas west of the city as descendants of the immigrants who arrived in San Antonio during the Mexican Revolution left "Little Laredito." That area had been the original Mexican barrio of two-room hovels with wood-burning stoves in the shadow of downtown San Antonio during the early 1900s.

Against this backdrop, Our Casas Resident Council, Inc., is bringing fresh possibilities to a new era of growth and change in San Antonio's Westside. This time, the opportunity introduces modern, affordable housing that moderate and low-income families can proudly transform into their homes. Admittedly, it is an ambitious undertaking within an area that has been historically underserved and lacked the sustained economic investment that replaces blight with boom, but that doesn't faze Zeke Romo, Executive Director of Our Casas.

"Our Casas Resident Council, Inc. was formed in 1990 as a nonprofit organization to empower residents of the housing projects in San Antonio," says Romo, a community advocate who has dedicated decades of his life to linking workforce development and affordable housing to create stable communities. "Initially, our focus was people living in the projects, primarily on the Westside. Later, we added the mission of empowering individuals and families to pursue affordable housing. Currently, we are a HUD-certified agency offering comprehensive housing counseling, which means we counsel first-time homebuyers. These are people with low and moderate-income trying to buy their first house," says Romo.

Our Casas also helps with another aspect of housing, assisting people facing foreclosures. Many homeowners in the Westside community got into trouble with foreclosures because of COVID. Often these families were



unaware of their options and did not know where to seek help, in some cases, until it was too late or close to it. Our Casas works with mortgage lenders to find financing solutions that enable these families to remain in their homes. Romo says foreclosure mitigation is an ongoing effort of the organization.

“We added a third part to our mission when we saw the scope of the affordable housing need,” says Romo. “This involves the construction of affordable homes, and we call them homes instead of housing units because homes signify a family residence. Our target areas include the near Westside and Eastside of San Antonio, two of the most impoverished areas. Again, we sell the homes to first-time homebuyers or moderate or low-income families,” he adds.

Romo explains that moderate or low income includes persons who reside in San Antonio and earn less than 80% of the average median income. For a family of four, that percentage translates into a family of four making up to \$63,900 and below. Our Casas works with federal funding through the City of San Antonio’s HUD/ HOME program. This money enables the agency to subsidize the construction costs of the homes. The completed homes are sold to qualified, first-time home buyers for as little as two-thirds of the average median price of a new home. For example, Our Casas recently completed a three-bedroom, two-bath, all-electric home measuring thirteen hundred square feet. In August, they sold the property for \$170,000. That price compares to the current median average price in San Antonio of \$325,000 to \$350,000.

“COVID forced us to increase prices because of the tight supply of construction materials,” says Romo. “However, our main goal remains the same; to cover the cost of the homes so that we can continue building homes. Currently, we have two more properties available that we’re selling for \$185,000 and \$190,000, respectively, on the Westside. Also, we just started building five more

homes, and we’re partnering with SER Jobs for Progress National, Inc. (SER National). We have agreed to receive funding assistance from SER National for part of the home’s construction. Two are projected to be completed by the summer of 2023, and the others by the end of 2023. Another exciting partnership is the funding from a group called Local Initiatives Support Corporation. They’re a national nonprofit, and one of the things they offer is low-interest construction loans. All these efforts are so that Our Casas can keep the cost of the home down as low as possible and affordable to the buyer. Our program has been doing this since 1990, or 33 years. Since 2005 alone, we have built 47 affordable homes, nine of which have been built in the last three years,” adds Romo.

Our Casas founders focused their work on San Antonio’s near Westside rather than other parts of the city because the area was seen as one of the worst examples of continued segregation in



the United States. The situation was so difficult, even in the 1960s, that CBS News broadcast a story on the Westside, calling it one of the poorest areas in the country. Romo said the board of Our Casas continues to believe the Westside is where the agency can make the most impact. Another more recent factor is the availability of vacant properties the agency can buy in the near Westside and turn into new affordable housing because investors are gobbling up the vacant land and doubling or tripling the price. “We’re also open to building anywhere inside Loop 410, the freeway that encircles some of San Antonio’s oldest neighborhoods,” says Romo.

Romo’s journey to Our Casas enabled him to acquire the very skillsets that are helping him lead the organization. He finished his education at the University of Texas – Austin in 1975 and started working in nonprofits in east Austin, Texas, where he was involved in developing a small, affordable housing project, at the time, one of the very first ones around. Following that work, Romo went into workforce manpower programs.

He believes strongly that workforce training and affordable housing go together. People cannot buy an affordable home or quality housing



without a good job, and they cannot get a good job if they are always worried about where they will live.

"I ended up in affordable housing because what I enjoy most is when you turn over the keys to a new homeowner or a homeowner family," says Romo. "It never

gets old. You can quickly see the smiles, especially if they have been renting for fifteen or twenty years. Even more so when you know, this is the first home that they own. They can now pass the property on to their families, accumulate wealth, and they can realize the American dream. This is one of the greatest rewards for Our Casas. We take vacant land full of weeds and turn them into beautiful homes that families can enjoy," he adds.

The agency also provides another critical service to San Antonio's Westside. U.S. Representative Joaquin Castro was instrumental in securing \$1,000,000 in a community project award for Our Casas to repair owner-occupied homes in the area. Also, Bexar County, where San Antonio is located, awarded the agency \$300,000 for home repairs. These grants complement the agency's capabilities to build new homes while repairing and fixing existing ones. Romo says San Antonio, like many other major American cities, is seeing aging owner-occupied housing that requires government subsidies for the retiring Boomer Generation, many now in their late-60's or older, to maintain their homes.

"I think that in the last few years, both the city and the county have paid more attention to the housing need in our region," says Romo. "The city passed a \$150 million bond for affordable housing in the past year, adding much assistance to address the need. In addition, there are three important allies we are glad to see actively helping develop affordable housing. One is other nonprofit organizations that are very qualified and experienced in developing affordable housing. The other stakeholders are neighborhood associations. Groups like the Historic Westside Neighborhood Association and Avenida Guadalupe are good examples, to name just two. Councilwoman Teri Castillo, who represents most of the near Westside, and

County Commissioner Justin Rodriguez, in which much of the near Westside also falls, are the third factor since they support the work of the community. All these groups are working to stymie gentrification. What we do not want to see is what we witnessed in East Austin, where high taxes forced out longtime residents following the influx of new money eager to scoop up choice Texas real estate in their neighborhoods at crazy money for us but less than what they had become accustomed to in other areas of the country from where they came," says Romo.

Our Casas is also championing more affordable apartment living for people at the 30% level of median income who cannot afford to live anywhere except getting into housing projects. The agency is encouraged to see a new program in the city to catch homes that go into code enforcement where residents are warned to repair their homes or they can't live there. Romo says program officials are more proactive in helping the affected residents improve their casitas before they lose them or have to move out.

What is the future of San Antonio, now among the cities experiencing the fastest growth rate in the country? How will Our Casas assist existing homeowners to survive the onslaught and fiscal impact of rising home prices and the taxes that go with them? "Controlled growth is always welcome, and it's needed," says Romo. "What we try to work for is to ensure that the existing residents in the neighborhoods also get their part of that growth and the wealth that's coming in. As long as we can see that they're doing that, we have a motto of rebuilding the community one home at a time. It will take a while, but many groups and organizations have been working in San Antonio to do that. Our Casas is one of the ones trying to do the work also. I think we're all moving in the right direction to make sure that the residents here share in that wealth and new housing and that we're open to new populations coming in," he states.

Our Casas, says Romo, is led by a board that is optimistic about its continued relevance in the future of San Antonio. "I think there's a place for everyone as long as everyone keeps trying to do the best they can to help people," he says. "Generally, we try to help them as best we can as long as we push forward and work with others. With the younger people, many have that desire in their hearts, and one of the things we're trying to do at Our Casas is build up the new people coming up. This means that they know the techniques and technology of the programs and have a feel for helping their community. It speaks well of all trying to help others realize the American dream of homeownership," concludes Romo.

Achieving Opportunities Through Perseverance



La Oportunidad has been serving America's Twin Cities, Minneapolis-St. Paul, for more than 35 years, and today it stands as the leading dual-language voice and social services agency for the growing Latino community in Hennepin County, home to more than 1.2 million people in Minnesota.

"One of the things that we try to do is educate the community and give it information and resources and teach our stakeholders how to access these valuable assets," says Eloisa Echávez, a staunch community advocate involved with La Oportunidad for 24 years and serves as its Executive Director.

"First of all, I am an immigrant Latina, so I'm conscious of the necessities of the Latino community. I have always enjoyed everything I can contribute to the community and have always done it inclusively as a volunteer and serving on committees and in the community. Also, in this job, I serve Latino families, so there is personal and professional satisfaction for them to develop and grow. When they advance, they break the barriers that must be broken. The truth is that there are many challenges our families face today. However, the one about immigration is one of the most important. So is access to the services because many families don't know services for them exist and how to access them. So, while resources exist, they don't know, so I would say this is one of the other most critical needs. Many families are coming anew into the immigration status, and they have many barriers to overcome in all the areas," says Echávez.

La Oportunidad offers an array of programs, including the Latino Youth Leadership Program. Its goal is significant, as the agency outlines. "The Latino Youth Leadership Program provides weekly school-year groups, a leadership program, summer programming, and special activities

to assist Latino adolescents to develop their assets, positive attitudes, and behaviors in the areas of education, self, family, and community that will help them to become positive, contributing members of the community. The Latino Youth Program assists at-risk Twin Cities Latinos ages 12-18 to develop positive attitudes and behaviors in education, self, family, and community to become positive, contributing members of the community. Latino adolescents and children face cultural and language barriers, making thriving in society more challenging. La Oportunidad provides an education that empowers Latino teenagers to develop skills to help them solve problems, plan for their futures, and build positive relationships at home and school to help them succeed."

Echávez underscores the importance of the region's Latino youths. "We continue to open our doors daily offering our services, and our strength is helping youth," says Echávez. "You know it's said that they are the future of our community. They're the present, too, of our people. They give strength, they work collaboratively, and when we went through the pandemic, they were the ones who were strong and kept going forward. They were even helping the rest of the community when protestors burned our building during the public outcry over the tragic killing of George Floyd. Our building was burned, too, along with the whole area.

This was a moment of truth, and our young people rose to the test. Instead of becoming furious and protesting because others burned our organization's building, they became more potent in our

community. Our young people helped with cleaning. They picked up all the debris as volunteers and helped serve food and pass out the basic necessities to all the people. There were many donations, and our youths became involved in all of that. So really, the future is with the young people we have and all their strength and motivation. We need to prepare them to be leaders in the community." La Oportunidad's, The Jóvenes Profesionales' (Young Professionals) program addresses that potential. The agency states the project "was created to help eliminate barriers Latino youth face to complete their high school education, to pursue post-secondary education, and to prepare them for a job that leads to a professional career path. The Young Professionals Program's mission is to prepare Latino high school students and young adults of diverse backgrounds to become successful professionals and community leaders."

Echávez adds, "seeing young people graduate from high school and university studies and become professionals is exciting. They return to our community as mentors; some have even been on our board of directors. For me, this goes to the point of our objective. These successes are my motivation personally and professionally. It is rewarding to see that our Latino families prosper and that they become positive contributors to the community. This gratification is why it is difficult to separate the personal from the professional because, above all, when one is in a nonprofit, the work is not a job. We see it as a mission. We see it as a purpose in our life."

Admittedly, the COVID-19 pandemic genuinely impacted La Oportunidad's program participants and led to new beginnings. "The parents did not have access to the technology, and many did not know how to access the services and programming remotely. So, we converted all our curriculum, all our services, and all the information to virtual. This meant we never suspended our services. The difficult challenge many of our families faced was dealing with the virus. Many families are large and live in the same limited space. That meant when one person was contaminated or had the virus, the others in the same house would get sick too. Soon, everyone got sick, and everybody recovered. Then, it started again like a cycle because they were close. Also, mental health has become a concern because you can imagine being closed in and not having access to anything for an extended period. Our families were not living in a mansion with everything available to them. Yet, our community is tenacious and strong, and they continue moving forward."

The Latino Power Youth Summer Program marked another milestone in La Oportunidad's unique ability to recognize and respond to the needs and aspirations of the local Latino community. As the program's coordinators summarize, "the organization coordinated and facilitated a series of summer activities in partnership with schools, community organizations/institutions. Forty-one families participated in this program. Some activities included A 3-day camping trip at Carver Park Reserve, field trips to the Minnesota Zoo and the Science Museum, and a

canoeing field trip at Hidden Falls Regional Park. This was the first time for most of these families to participate in this experience. They developed and increased team-building skills, mental and physical health, knowledge and appreciation for nature/the environment, healthy lifestyle (including physical activity and learning how to relax and disconnect from technology).”

That spirit also fuels the successful Latinos Ending Abuse Program (LEAP), which helps Latino adults to learn and apply skills to end violent behavior in their relationships, families, and communities. Also, “The Padres Program, which provides year-round comprehensive programming to empower Latino parents with the tools necessary to support their children’s education, and raise healthy, well-adjusted children who will contribute to their communities.”

“Are there challenges? Of course, says Echávez, but not unlike that faced by most other active nonprofit organizations. “The biggest challenge always is fundraising. Every year one cycle begins and ends. Then we start all over again. It just goes around and around. Also, the organizations that give money to foundations and various agencies of the government that give money change their priorities. During the pandemic, they made changes, so you must be creative and resourceful to continue the struggle. All organizations and nonprofits go through this. We’re not different. This is a reality to be aware of constantly, and we have to be conscious of it as a nonprofit,” she adds.

Echávez is optimistic about the future and remains committed as ever. “As I have said, I am passionate about serving

the community. Our work is an investment of effort; sometimes, we see the rewards immediately, and sometimes things take longer. Still, this work is about seeing families prosper. I would tell anyone involved in community work to strive to be energetic, even when experiencing challenges. Show up like you are at a new job with the same enthusiasm and energy. Then, we can see the zeal and results of the organization and the programs. These outcomes keep us motivated and full of energy to continue in this job. To me, La Oportunidad is more than our name. It is how we view our purpose; every day, I see the results that are palpable in everything we do. These fruits of our labor are everything we need to continue.”





SER

EARLY HEAD START

Pursuing Life's Opportunities with the Amazing Help of SER Early Head Start Bilkis Sanusi: Mother of Two Bound for a Ph.D. in Healthcare

If life is a maze, you can be sure that Bilkis Sanusi has discovered the key to finding her way through it. The mother of two small children smiles with appreciation when she speaks about how SER Early Head Start has helped her overcome many obstacles on a journey that has seen its share of challenges. Sanusi says she is determined to keep going forward for her future and that of her family until she achieves her goal of earning a doctorate or Ph.D., even if it takes years. Looking back on how far she has come only strengthens her resolve to cross the finish line and go on.

"We had our first child in Washington, DC, on December 22, 2019, and we were living in Maryland for almost two-and-a-half years," says Sanusi. She remembers feeling that her heart was set on fulfilling her roles as a new mother and a woman deeply dedicated to working as a professional in the field of health. The problem was Bilkis felt overwhelmed by the combination of circumstances. "Becoming

a mom, while enrolled in an online master's program for my education and career, I felt alone and without help in a very different environment from what I was used to in Texas," adds Sanusi.

Still, she and her husband bravely pressed on caring for their small son, each pursuing their daily responsibilities. That's when a new blessing and complication happened. They learned the stork would soon revisit the Sanusi household. "I found out that I was pregnant with our second child, and this is when we faced a life-changing decision," says Sanusi. "At that time, my job allowed me to work from home three days a week, but I was still required to go into the office two days a week, and this was hard because I didn't have a place to care for my son. It was difficult to work full-time and focus on my education because there was no Early Head Start program. Our only choice was to get a private babysitter, but I didn't trust anyone, and then COVID hit," adds Sanusi.

Bilkis faced the dilemma millions of other working moms were trying to figure out during the pandemic. "We decided to move to Texas because my family was here," says Sanusi. "I knew they would help me while I found a better answer to caring for my children while I continued my education. During my search, I am fortunate to have come across SER Early Head Start. What an amazing place because they provided the best care, and my son progressed beautifully. Before entering the program, he was quiet, and I worried about why he was not speaking. However, after he was in the SER Early Head Start program, he began to learn so much and was a different child. I was amazed at how he communicated and his way with the teachers and other children," says Bilkis.

On November 3, 2021, Sanusi gave birth to her second child, a daughter. "Earlier, I remembered turning down a job before finding SER Early Head Start because everyone in my family worked," said Bilkis. "The difference now was that I found a safe, caring program to help me with my children. Now, I tell others I understand when moms say they find it hard to work if they have small children. Daycare is expensive, or you don't know if your children will be ok. To be clear, SER Early Head Start didn't happen overnight because they had a waiting list, but I signed up anyway. Patience is needed, but it is important to apply to enroll your children and wait if you have to. When



SER Early Head Start called me, I was so excited and relieved because it answered my prayers," she adds.

Bilkis proclaims proudly that SER Early Head Start has "had a great impact on my children, especially my son who was used only to me and was not seeing other people. We were very close, and I was worried about how he would adjust. Oh my God, SER Early Head Start has been the happiest thing for me. He is intelligent and can describe things and find out things for himself, thanks to how the school staff helps nurture and encourage him daily. Even my daughter, who is just one year old, is doing amazing things, and I credit SER Early Head Start for both of their progress. I never regret putting my children into the SER Early Head Start program; in fact, I am certain this is why they are doing so well," adds Sanusi.

Today Bilkis has her sights set on her possibilities and the promise of focusing on her life's purpose in healthcare. "My children will be fine as they move into pre-k and beyond, so now, I can concentrate on my work," says Sanusi. "I have my master's in public health and am working as a medical eligibility specialist and a certified community health worker. I aim to pursue my education and earn a Ph.D. to become a doctor. I would tell other moms to sign up for SER Early Head Start and let them help; they have me. It is possible, and you, too, can pursue your life opportunities!" adds Bilkis.



SER Early Head Start Helps One Young Mom Fulfill a Promise: Saide Mairily Santiago Pursues a Love Born Out of Her Family's Loss

Mairily Santiago still remembers that one year between 7 and 8, when she lived at a hospital where her baby brother was a cancer patient. Thanks to SER Early Head Start's support, this young mother dreams of turning that love of caring for others into her life's calling as a kinesiologist. This highly specialized field of medicine studies the human body's movements and the interconnection of muscles and bones in motion.

"I was a little girl and would go from home to school to the hospital every day, and I was there the whole time because my baby brother couldn't leave," says Mairily. "I enjoyed being in that setting and learning how nurses and doctors cared for him and others with so much love, attention, and deep commitment. That's when I realized, even at that early age, that this is what I wanted to do; to dedicate my life to work in the medical field. This is why I am now working hard to get into nursing school. SER Early Head Start is an important part of fulfilling that promise to my little brother and myself. I can have options once I get my bachelor's degree," she adds.

For Mairily, service to the community will enable her to pay it forward in appreciation of those loved ones who have supported her as a young mother. "SER Early Head Start provides vital childcare for my son and allows me to continue my education so I can have my career, be

stable and independent and give back any way I can," says Santiago. Indeed, Mairely is facing a growing need nationally. According to a 2018 Center for American Progress study, childcare in the United States continues to be a significant factor in a family's economic stability. It determines how parents can spend their time. Nearly six out of every ten working American households cite the care of their children as a significant challenge for their job outlook. Moreover, mothers are 40 percent more likely than fathers to see their jobs impacted by childcare.

"I am especially indebted to SER Early Head Start because the program is caring for my son so I can become that successful woman that my mom helped me to aspire to," says Mairely. "She has always encouraged my little sister and me and has been there for us. My baby brother went to heaven when he was a year and a week old. I feel like what I am doing now is the best way to honor his life and help others. Also, I want my mom and dad to be proud of me for being who I am and will become in my work," adds Santiago.

Participants in SER Early Head Start consistently rank the combined development of their children as one of the program's most vital attributes. "I see how much he enjoys attending school," says Mairely. "Best of all, my son is learning very quickly, and he's teaching me so much, too, because of the SER Early Head Start program. We will be listening to a song, and he'll start dancing. My family asks me where he learned that, and I tell them it's from SER Early Head Start. Also, when he went in, my son didn't speak at all; his sensory skills improved so much. I can see his progress daily. For example, he lets me know when he's hungry or needs to use the bathroom; simple things I know, but to a mom, these are fundamental life skills he's learning from the SER Early Head Start class. When I see these improvements, that allows me to want to do even more to make our lives better and have a brighter future," she says.

SER Early Head Start teaches children critical social skills such as interacting with other children, following instructions, and becoming self-reliant, plus exploring areas of learning that tap into a child's unique aptitude, abilities, and interests. Over decades of experience, SER Early Head Start has developed a proven educational and childcare model that is ranked among the best in the nation without thousands of successful young graduates to prove it. "I know that if my son had stayed



at home without anyone his age to play with, learn alongside or get to know, he would be a different child. Instead, he comes home excited and wants to show me what he's done, and I can see his joy and satisfaction. It is wonderful what SER Early Head Start has done in his life and mine," says Mairely.

Santiago says she is impressed with how the SER Early Head Start staff is always in contact with her when they have information she may need to receive. "I am very conscious about punctuality because I respect them, and I appreciate that they gave their direct contact number," says Mairely. "This encourages me to ask questions and be more involved in the program, which is good. I have volunteered to help at SER Early Head Start because they have made me feel at home and part of a family. Honestly, this program has changed my life, and I will never be able to say thank you enough. One day, when I am providing healthcare for others, SER Early Head Start will be one of the big reasons I was able to do so," says Santiago.



We Have a New Life Now Thanks to SER Early Head Start Sharon Baker: Single Mom and Occupational Therapist

There is an air of positivity and encouragement in Sharon Baker's words as she speaks with excitement about her future. Listening to her story inspires other mothers facing the same personal and professional challenges she once was. Thanks to SER Early Head Start, her outlook now is very different.

"I remember thinking about my situation and asking myself, what was I going to do with my life," she begins. "I was a young mother with a daughter who needed me, her father was not in the picture, and I knew whatever Ellie's future was going to be depended on my decisions. Her care and well-being were coming first in my life, no matter what, and that's why I am so thankful to SER Early Head Start. I was seeking a place where my daughter could thrive, and I'm so glad I found it," she says.

She recalls reading about careers in the

healthcare field and being practical. Sharon knew her education would need to be balanced with her other responsibilities. This is where SER Early Head Start opened the way and made it possible for Sharon's dream to become a reality. She could land a job that fit her like a glove because it tapped into her passion, and she could see the light at the end of a dark tunnel she was experiencing.

"This career would allow me to care for my daughter, feed ourselves and have a roof over our heads," she says. "The best part was that I could study online, which was very important because of my mommy duties. SER Early Head Start gave me the peace of mind that Ellie was being cared for and learning too. She bonded quickly with the whole team at the Little Dragons Early Head Start center, and that let me focus on learning what I needed for my work. I would be helping other people



become self-sufficient, and they would be helping me in a way that wasn't so different," adds Sharon.

Sharon provided the will to achieve her dream by applying herself through months of intensive study and preparation to pass her coursework. SER Early Head Start supplemented that desire and dedication with childcare services at no cost and support.

"SER Early Head Start allowed me to become self-sufficient, and no, you can't do it all alone, but the program gives you the support to stand up for yourself and learn how to face a problem, tackle it, and feel tons better for having done so."

Sharon says without the childcare program, her journey would have been challenging, if not altogether impossible, for Sharon to achieve independently.

"I always tell people, yes, I have my parents and friends who are wonderful and always willing to help when I may be dealing with an unexpected situation," says Sharon. "Still, I want to do this on my own, and that doesn't mean I do not appreciate their help. SER Early Head Start allowed me to become self-sufficient, and no, you can't do it all alone, but the program gives you the support to stand up for yourself and learn how to face a problem, tackle it, and feel tons better for having done so," adds Baker.

For Sharon, the aging Baby Boomer population is making occupational therapists a highly sought talent pool in the United States. Also, special needs younger people require patience, training, and assistance in acquiring life skills that enable them to function independently. Her future looks bright.

The SER Early Head Start program emphasizes individuality in assessing participants' needs like hers and pathways families can sustain together. "We are finding

that meeting mothers where they are in their lives enable us to help create the right solutions," says Araceli Paniagua, SER Early Head Start Director. "This is what has made SER Early Head Start such a success. The program help moms like Sharon pursue their career aptitude and talents. At the same time, we provide the necessary childcare and development assistance for children like Ellie at an important time in her life. They are a wonderful example of the transformative power of SER Early Head Start and why we see an ongoing need ahead for the program. Our graduates are the best testimony of its success," adds Paniagua.

Sharon said the moment she finished her studies, she immediately began to look for work and knew SER Early Head Start was cheering her on. "It has not been easy, but nothing worthwhile is, and that makes it so much better when you accomplish it. SER Early Head Start helped me get a job to care for Ellie and me. Now, we can go live nearly anywhere and be

self-sufficient. I would tell other women to set a similar goal so they too can be ok, self-reliant, and even overcome some mental health challenges we all face. Once you feel purpose and have a plan in place, follow it, and you will see the results. Reach out to SER Early Head Start. They are a great team, and good things will follow, so I encourage every woman with a personal and professional dream and the will to make it happen to go see them," says Baker.



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NFJP

On the Road to Success: Marco Rovira and SER National Farmworker Jobs Program



Marco Antonio Rovira is a man who is driven to achieve, and his sights are already set on one day owning and operating his own 18-wheeler tractor-trailer to take him there. Meanwhile, he is excited, determined, and working hard as a recent graduate from commercial truck driver school. SER Jobs for Progress and the National Farmworker Jobs Program made the opportunity possible for Marco. His new job is a dream come true as he reflects on how far he has progressed since arriving back in the United States, where he was born. Rovira returned from Mexico, where he grew up with a very different experience during those critical formative years of his life.

"I was born in Stockton, California, but my parents took me to Mexico as a child, and that was the only world I knew," says Rovira. "My schooling was in Spanish, and everything around me was of a very different place and another way of life. SER Jobs for Progress has changed everything for me with the National Farmworker Jobs Program. When I think back, Mexico was my whole existence, the home where all my first memories happened. So, you can imagine the shock when I returned to the USA after I turned 18 years old, and everything was different; quicker, crowded, and more hustle. The most difficult part for me was thinking how I would fit in an entirely new world with another language and where I needed new skills," he adds.

Rovira moved into the agricultural industry and made his way into what workers call "coolers." These refrigerated facilities are the vast processing, packing, and shipping centers for California's booming \$50 billion agricultural business. Marco enjoyed and was good at operating equipment, which made him a valuable asset. He quickly realized the value of having acquired his entrepreneurial parents' love of business as he helped them along the border in Mexico. The new skills he was learning would open an entirely new opportunity thanks to SER Jobs for Progress and the National Farmworker Jobs Program.

"Our community migrates between Yuma, Arizona, and Northern California, following the crops every season," says Marco. "Last April, we arrived in Gilroy and took possession of the house where we would live when we met the SER Jobs for Progress team. They were out in the community conducting outreach with farmworkers and asked me if I was interested in learning new skills through job training. Immediately, I thought about the truck driving dream and how a better-paying job like that

would help me take care of my wife and our children. I jumped at the chance," adds Rovira.

Marco requested SER Jobs for Progress National Farmworker Jobs Program for financial assistance to help pay for him to go through school and earn his Class A commercial driver's license (CDL). The CDL course costs nearly \$8,000 and requires students to attend school on-campus full-time for an intensive three-month period. Rovira passed the course with solid grades, despite having to learn much of the material that is in English and includes very complex California transportation regulations. Then, he immediately signed up to discover more CDL content and acquired endorsements to drive double, triple, and fuel tanker loads.

"I realized that education was my way forward economically, and SER Jobs for Progress National Farmworker Jobs Progress made it possible for me to get on that path," says Rovira. "My goal is to support the agricultural industry that I love. This goal required I was first trained and licensed to drive commercial vehicles to pull double and triple loads. I am grateful that my wife supported me in pursuing my goal, and I am very proud of her for having worked to sustain the family and even caring for our 13 and 10-year-olds plus our 1-year-old baby. Their future will be brighter, and our family is better equipped to face whatever the future brings because I can earn more money and set my schedule.

"Nothing would have happened without the help of SER Jobs for Progress National Farmworker Jobs Progress," says Rovira. "They provided me much more than the financial support. They were there for me when I had questions or needed guidance. The staff cares about the students and their success. I wholeheartedly tell anyone who asks how they can advance and talk to the people at SER Jobs for Progress. They made a difference, not just for me, but for my family and all the farmworkers I can help by delivering the crops they pick daily. I was one of them, and I will never forget that as I drive by and look over to the fields where I once stooped over all day to earn a living. That is until help came from SER Jobs for Progress National Farmworker Jobs Program," concludes Marco.

Jose Miguel Moreno Guzman: Truck Driving & Author

Jose Miguel Moreno Guzman was born in Uriangato, Guanajuato, Mexico. He belongs to a family of merchants, and art captivated him at an early age; he wrote his first short story at fourteen. Jose has achieved many goals in his first year in SER NFJP. While working full-time in a production factory, he was preparing, at the same time, for his Class A business license, US citizenship, and finishing his first novel. Jose used every hour of each day

to the fullest. He was working from 6 am to 2 pm, then from 5-9 pm, he studied at the CDL Express Trucking school and while working on his novel "Fulgor Oscuro Vol. 1 Emperadores de La Penumbra." In addition, he was studying and preparing to take the United States Citizenship test. He passed the Citizenship test and is now a Naturalized United States Citizen. He obtained his Class A License and finished and published his novel, which



AMAZON is now selling. Jose has already been hired as a truck driver. His new goals are to immigrate his family to the United States and finish Vol. 2 of his novel. He is a young man with motivation and goals. With his energy and drive, Jose will continue to achieve other goals.

A photograph of a group of diverse people, including a woman in the foreground who is smiling and clapping. They appear to be at a formal event or ceremony.

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SCSEP

I'm Part of the Disney Family Thanks to SER and the SCSEP Program: Ronald Steptoe – Security Services, Disney Corporation

Spend a few minutes having a conversation with Ronald Steptoe, and you will feel like he's rediscovered his childhood all over again. "I thank the SER Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP) for getting me jump-started. My days were always busy when I was working, but when I retired, my biggest fear was what to do next," says Steptoe. "I heard about SCSEP and was told it was a great help for seniors, and I wasn't too busy around the house, so I thought I would check it out. Pretty quick, I came to see and learn the program was real, even beyond my expectations," adds Steptoe.

From that first step, a leap of faith, Steptoe had reached out and met Larry Mercado and the SCSEP team to understand better what was expected of him. "What I appreciated was that I had a lot of questions, and they were always there to get back to me, usually the same day or the next. This transparency was especially important in understanding the program's training and my responsibilities since they also encouraged participants to go out and look for the next job opportunity. Looking back, I

think their commitment and encouragement motivated me to get up and get going. It was the best decision I could have made," he adds.

Steptoe's most vivid impression of SCSEP is that the program is a win-win for the community he enjoys serving and his well-being. "I am spending every day doing for others, and my job also gives me a sense of purpose," says Steptoe. "In fact, one of the most fun assignments I had in SCSEP was working in my neighborhood's multi-purpose center. Every day I saw and had great conversations with people I knew, and I loved it. Especially fun was reading to the children who got to know me and would come up and say, hello, Mr. Tiptoe!"

Larry Mercado describes Ronald as an excellent SCSEP role model who became invested in his learning and exemplified the project's success. "Our goal at SER SCSEP is to reawaken that spirit of possibilities within our program participants, then help them navigate the training process to assist them in making a good match," says Mercado. "What I liked about Mr. Tiptoe, and what makes him stand out, is his confidence and willingness to do. When our training site partners see that in someone, they get excited, too, because they know this person will do well interacting and socializing with others. Ronald's positive outlook is a strong plus for him," adds Mercado.

Steptoe says he enjoys serving as a mentor and role model for others, and this personal character trait brought Ronald to the attention of a work site employer. That chance came after weeks of people discreetly observing his work habits, and they offered him a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity he had never dreamed possible. "I was working as a security guard at a beautiful building and would tell the younger guys to always dress neatly in their uniforms, tuck their shirts in and look their best possible," says Steptoe. "SCSEP got me started up again, and what they taught me revived the values and work habits I developed over my entire career. So, it was second nature to me when I was helping the younger guys, and I guess someone was watching," adds Ronald. The observant employer was the Walt Disney Company, one of the world's most admired brands. Ronald was selected among the top five to transition from a contract security guard to a staff position. "That's right, I joined the same company as Mickey Mouse and all those other characters and movies I enjoyed growing up. Now, I was part of the Disney

family. You can't imagine the difference this made for me. I went from earning \$ 15 an hour to \$ 24 an hour. I was even off on weekends and felt like I was starting a whole new career, and it wasn't just the money. Everyone treats me like what I do matters, which only motivates me to do the best I can. I thank SCSEP for showing me that life isn't over when you retire. In fact, this fine program opened a whole new chapter for me, and I'm excited every day to get after it," says Steptoe.

Mercado says SCSEP is like a treasure hunt going out into the community and discovering those valuable gems in willing men and women who still have so much to offer. "All they need is some encouragement, guidance, and training to sharpen skills they already have or are eager to acquire," says Larry. "The program allows them to do more than what they may think possible because there is always someone close by, a call, an email, a quick meeting, to address their questions or concerns. Over the years, SER SCSEP has proven to be one of the most successful paths for extraordinary folks to do exceptional things," adds Mercado.

As for Steptoe, he's on his way, literally. "I

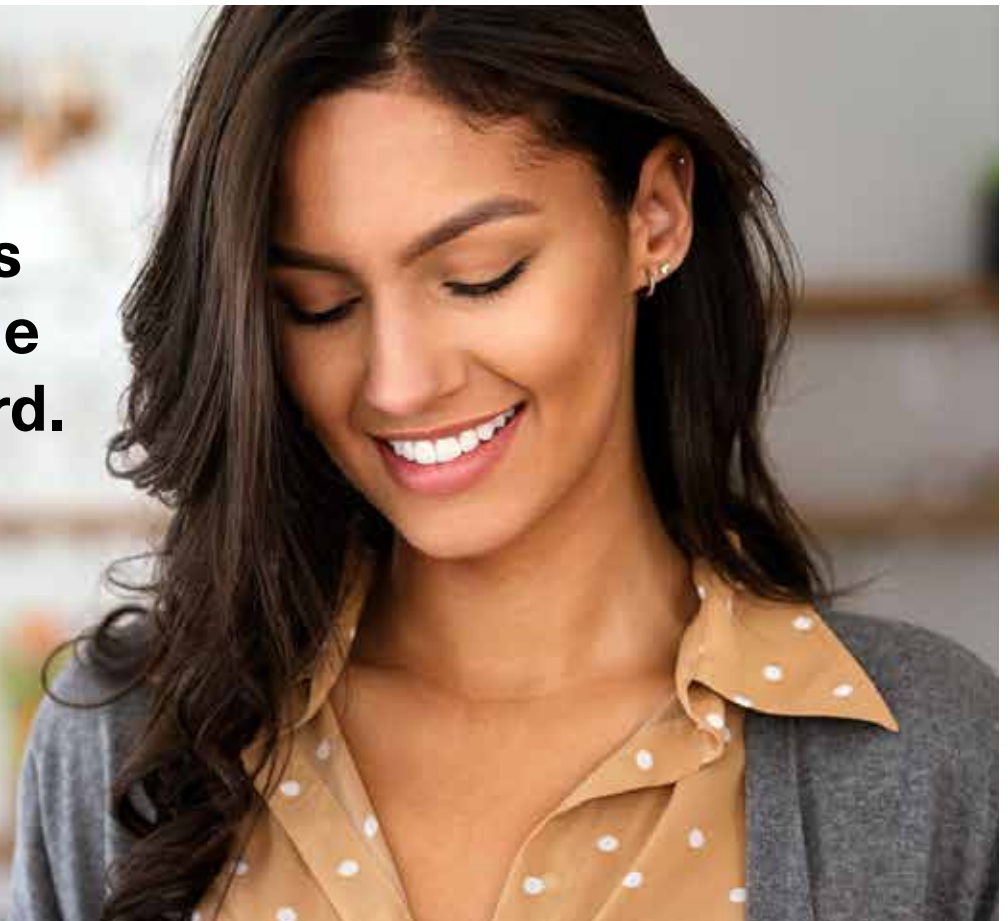
already have my Disney pass, and as soon as possible, I'm headed to Disneyworld, Disneyland, or both. Why not! Thanks, SCSEP, because of you, I have found the kid in me again, and I'm having the time of my life," says Ronald, with joy in his every word and laughter to top it off.



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SCSEP Program Made Me Feel We Are a Team: Jacqueline Roberts – Substance Abuse Counselor

Jacqueline Roberts says she begins and ends every day feeling blessed to have a calling centered around helping others in her community. “Even before I joined the SER Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP), I always believed that I could contribute to making the lives of others better, and my own if I focused on serving them,” she says. “That is why I first joined a ministry helping individuals in prison, and this prepared me for the opportunities that would come later,” adds Roberts.

Jacqueline came into SCSEP through a referral while working with a neighborhood youth education project and quickly fell in love with how this SER program offered her a path forward. “I could improve my job skills in an area that I thoroughly enjoyed and earn some income at the same time,” says Roberts. “My husband had passed away, and the benefits I received were helpful, but I also wanted to stay active and have a purpose. SCSEP allowed me to do this and more. I realized there were many ways to get even more involved in my community,” she adds.

Roberts recalled that during her church assignment helping inmates, they spoke about their lives and how drugs had often been a factor that led to their mistakes and encounters with the law. She says SCSEP now opened a door through their financial assistance. She started going to school to become a substance abuse counselor who could be a positive influence in the lives of young people as well as adults. The goal was to acquire the formal training built upon caring human values she learned as a child. “My Momma was a sharecropper, and I was one of 16 children, so life was not easy,” remembers Jacqueline. “But the spiritual upbringing we received daily made me rich

in my faith, and we knelt nightly around the bed as children to always be thankful for the blessings we received, no matter how small. This was a strong foundation in my life, and I knew God would guide me to do the same for others. SCSEP enabled me to fulfill that dream and continue in my journey of service to others,” she says.

Hilario Mercado, SER SCSEP Director for Texas, says the program’s attractiveness to seniors is its win-win structure. “The program participants benefit from training while earning a stipend, and the community gains too. Our SCSEP men and women are motivated, eager, and dedicated to giving back to their neighborhoods in a meaningful way. Ms. Roberts is a perfect example of selfless service. She wanted to devote her life to helping others struggling with a substance

addiction. SCSEP provides her up to four years in a program with resources and support. However, true success happens because of her devotion to becoming a certified substance abuse counselor touching countless lives,” says Mercado.

“In truth, if I can help just one person, then SCSEP has made our community better, and someone’s life has been turned around. I want others to know that SCSEP is a beautiful program because it enriches a person’s life to be able to help others”

“I am not trying to change the whole world,” says Jacqueline. “In truth, if I can help just one person, then SCSEP has made our community better, and someone’s life has been turned around. I want others to know that SCSEP is a beautiful program because it enriches a person’s life to be able to help others. Also, I can only work part-time, and this program allows me to do that around a schedule I can handle. The other aspect I enjoy about the SCSEP model is being able to keep busy with my other volunteer activities, including my church and visiting elders in nursing facilities. This is a gratifying experience; I don’t mean it with money. Rather, with the knowledge that I am giving back to those who

have done so much for us. SCSEP has made all this possible because I know the staff is always here to assist. I wish the program was longer than four years because this is how much it benefits seniors,” adds Jacqueline.

Mercado says SCSEP introduces individuals with a wealth of life experience and earned knowledge to a local need, and the match-up can be extraordinary. “Over the years, I have seen SCSEP team up with a local community-based organization, and perhaps our program participant begins at an entry-level position,” says Mercado. “However, very quickly, they find that individuals like Ms. Roberts are raring to go and do more, so the biggest challenge is not being afraid to let go and widen their horizons. SCSEP is designed to allow for growth, so the community agency or program and the

SCSEP participant evolve an assignment. You would be amazed at how great these mutual opportunities are because all the stakeholders are invested in being successful,” says Mercado.

“I would say to others like myself who seek greater purpose to look into SCSEP,” says Jacqueline. “Don’t be afraid if along the way you may make mistakes. We’re not perfect, and it’s OK. Tomorrow’s another day. If somebody says you cannot do this, I say yes, you can. Find that little boy or girl in you again, and learn to forgive yourself and love yourself. SCSEP is a helping hand, but it is up to us to take it and lift ourselves up for the greater glory to God of serving others. Never give up,” she adds.





Winning the Top Prize with SER MUJER

Liliana Tortolero: Crown Catering Texas

Naming a business can reveal a great deal of where it is headed, and in the case of Crown Catering Texas, founder, and owner Liliana Tortolero wanted to make sure her company was going to triumph and be worthy of a crown, a fact made all the more secure with SER MUJER on her team.

"All of us came to this country to be successful, so I knew that my company was going to stand for winning and making it to the very top, and it was important to me that people know that," says Tortolero. "To ensure this, I first committed to preparing all our food from scratch and using only fresh, not canned, ingredients. Second, service to our customers was equally significant, as is doing all things with love and personal caring. This is where SER MUJER helped me by providing the foundation to build upon and keep us headed in the right direction. I feel that SER MUJER is my guide in business that can only make us sharper, stronger, and moving up," she adds

SER MUJER approaches every program

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participant with a willingness to meet them where they are in their business growth, and with Crown Catering Texas, they can help Liliana develop her already deep understanding of being customer-focused, quality conscious, and have a service-first skillset. "When you're the business owner, it can be hard to step back and sometimes see the bigger picture, so I'm glad SER MUJER is bringing its experience to my small company. With their training, willingness to answer questions, and years of know-how, Crown Catering Texas can avoid some of the pitfalls every start-up faces and better focus on our plans for seeing and seizing opportunities," adds Tortolero.

Crown Catering Texas includes the name of its home state, says Tortolero, because she is helping others start their own food truck businesses. She foresees a day when there may be a fleet of mobile kitchens, thanks to Crown Catering Texas' mentoring. "What a privilege to be able to serve one person or many people nourishment because this is what every human being needs, and I can help be part of that; this makes me very happy. Indeed, this vision of feeding others as a mission makes my company so different," says Liliana.

Surprisingly, Tortolero does not come from a lineage of restaurateurs and has not worked in a commercial kitchen before now, which she readily acknowledges. Yet, this is what makes the Crown Catering Texas story so unique. Liliana sees her business as the result of answering a calling, something she had to do in her life. "I have

lived in this country for 25 years, and it wasn't until I met SER MUJER that I saw the possibility of doing what I had always dreamed of: building my own food business. I was attending the Grand Prairie, Texas, Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, and this is where the SER MUJER Program manager began to share wonderful information with me. Sometimes, all it takes is answering when you hear the knock on your door," says Liliana.

SER MUJER sparked a fire so intense in Tortolero that she, in turn, inspired other women to believe they, too, can transform their dreams into reality. "However little or much I can help, this is my duty to do so, even if it seems like a tiny grain of sand. It can be emotional support, ideas, or our own story touching someone precisely at the right time. What you never know, like Natalie didn't, is whether we're ready until someone asks us, how can I help you? There may never be a perfect time, but every moment can be right, even if you are undergoing complicated matters. We must have the preparation and knowledge for everything necessary in our life journey.

To succeed, we should learn from those who have already proven they know what to do in all circumstances," she states.

In Tortolero's case, she was experiencing a life-changing situation that required setting up a new limited liability corporation or LLC for her business. SER MUJER assisted Liliana with the transition and provided Tortolero with the confidence of a team on her side. "Everything SER MUJER promised to do, they have done and even gone beyond. As importantly, their support and expertise are helping me to develop as a business owner. This includes being willing to step beyond my comfort zone. SER MUJER has a wide array of services, and more people need to know about them in the Latino community and others who have not always had a mentor or business angel to guide them. SER MUJER has the knowledge, processes, and financial assistance a start-up entrepreneur needs but doesn't always know where to go. Above all, everything SER MUJER promised to do, they have done and even gone beyond." says Tortolero.



SER MUJER Empowers the Sweet Taste of Success Brenda Castañeda: Boca Desserts

For Brenda Castañeda, success comes with the deliciously rich flavor and aroma of bananas, four per loaf of her very popular dessert bread. The new-generation chef is baking up a storm on her way to Boca Desserts achieving business acclaim, thanks to the guidance of the SER MUJER team.

"I started this as sort of a side hustle, and it has grown from there," says Brenda modestly, as in unaware of how successful her culinary product already is among those who have sampled her banana bread loaves. "The recipe came from my Mom, and she has been so supportive along the way that I owe what I have accomplished so far to her encouragement and guidance," she adds.

Brenda came to the attention of the SER MUJER team, which quickly saw the potential of Boca Desserts, especially when the person

baking the winning loaves is energetic, and willing to work hard to learn the skills, both in and out of the kitchen. "Right now, I produce four to ten loaves per session, and SER MUJER helped acquire the baking equipment I needed to increase capacity and keep quality consistent. Also, I like to keep a close eye on quality, and SER MUJER can assist me as I grow my baking to ensure I have the tools needed to succeed," says Brenda.

Baked goods are among the most popular new small business opportunities in the bustling Latino market, especially with the trend of blending flavors and adding that special kick of spice. While Brenda does not reveal her precise banana bread recipe, she proudly boasts that her loaves are tastier and doubly good because she incorporates twice the bananas into every loaf. Similarly, SER MUJER will help her tweak her business best

practices to ensure she is always focused on being her best competitor, on keeping quality high and profits coming.

"I started out knowing that there was much along the way to learn and improve on, both of which I enjoy doing," says Brenda. "This is why when baking, I keep going until I run out of time or ingredients prepared for that day. SER MUJER is so important to me, knowing they have my interest at heart can help teach me things about a business I don't know. I am feeling more confident in the kitchen every day, doing what I enjoy, and SER MUJER motivates me to learn the business of Boca Desserts so I can be more successful," she adds.

One of the characteristics of new small business owners is moving through their day and making decisions in real time as things happen. For Castañeda, SER MUJER can help her acquire more robust





planning and forecasting skills to plan inventory cost-effectively, set baking schedules that utilize cheaper energy costs, and maximize profit to sustain her company, even if, for now, it is still a part-time endeavor. SER MUJER offers a wide array of training sessions, many of which are self-paced so that entrepreneurs can learn as they go, conveniently during non-green time, when revenue is not lost.

"I like to know people are enjoying the banana bread I am preparing because my love of cooking does come out of a love of people, and this something I can recall seeing in my family since I was little," says Brenda. "My mother enjoys preparing delicious food for family and friends, and for me, there is something so special about the sweet aroma of freshly baked banana bread that reminds me of that purpose

in baking: to please and satisfy others through food. SER MUJER is helping me continue a tradition in my family that is both a tradition and a business," she adds.

SER MUJER works with many small business start-ups that have become very successful, more extensive operations because they are taught attention to detail, quality, and consistency in their products and services. These winning elements are vital to a company like Boca Desserts, and it is clear that Brenda is well on her way to becoming one of those brands. "Yes, I started this as a side hustle, and I charge \$10 a loaf for one or several because it is a fair price, and I know the product is excellent," says Castañeda. "I am still pursuing my education, and as I do, who knows where I will take Boca Desserts? I know that SER MUJER is giving me the confidence to think about the

possibilities for the future. Yes, it is scary, but it is inspiring, too," says Brenda.

SER MUJER is teaching Brenda that another critical dimension to a business like Boca Desserts is how to market the brand, and the growth of social media makes platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook ideal for a tangible like banana bread. Visitors can almost smell and taste her baked product, which inevitably leads to sampling and the possibility of repeat sales. "I am a little shy, but I am beginning to promote my banana bread more, and as the orders come in, I feel more confident. I did not begin with much money, but thanks to SER MUJER, their support has brought me to this point, and I am ready to go forward," says Brenda.

SER MUJER Helps Women Create a New Community

Yami Furlong: Mexicanas en Dallas



If we are the total of our life experiences, Mexicanas en Dallas creates a community that reflects many aspects of the entire country of Mexico. Yami Furlong, the creator, founder, and administrator of this highly successful group on Facebook, could not be more excited.

"I am so appreciative of the help SER MUJER has brought me because their assistance opens the way for us to grow and empower still more women," says Yami, who exudes constant energy and quickness of words and ideas. "It is so gratifying to share stories with friends that they can instantly connect with because they get it. They understand and can appreciate a story, a candy, or a TV show because these experiences were all part of their lives, too. As the name suggests, Mexicanas en Dallas

is by and for women who were born and grew up in Mexico before coming to the United States," she adds.

Yami moved to Dallas and lived in the city for 16 years when the idea of forming Mexicanas en Dallas happened. "The thought was born out of a realization that if I was bored and looking for people like me, there surely must be other women in my community of Dallas who felt the same way. Quickly, I learned my instincts were not only correct; I had struck a nerve with hundreds, and very quickly, thousands of other women also eagerly looking for the same type of association," adds Furlong.

"I have two hats that I wear," says Furlong, who readily admits both are her passion. "The first is the group I founded in November 2016

and is about to crack ten thousand members. The other is my real estate business, and they are intertwined. Recently, Facebook contacted me to talk about the things I was doing to reach so many people and motivate them into action. I smiled and laughed, too, because it had just happened. Now, with the help of SER MUJER, I am being more intentional about the future and seeing where the opportunities will be for this significant association," adds Yami.

Furlong's profession as a realtor takes her group along on a journey of learning and opportunity. "I enjoy empowering women through information and knowledge, as SER MUJER is doing with me," says Yami. "The SER MUJER team is very helpful, ready to address my questions, and supports me at an important point in my work. I feel like there is power in unity, and with them assisting me in formalizing the association, they are helping me direct where we want to go next," adds Yami.

SER MUJER has inspired Yami to consider how her experience can help create and lead women with varied talents and backgrounds. At the same time, Furlong is building her following as a real estate professional. "My customer referrals are women who are like I was at a certain point in my life, which is why they are in our group. Dallas was once a new and strange city to me. I had to

learn so much, including where to live, what to do, get to know others, and have other women get to know me. This was not an easy process. SER MUJER is helping me navigate a new process of structuring Mexicanas en Dallas into a facet of my work and create a strong foundation for the future," she adds.

Furlong says Mexicanas en Dallas connects women through their traditions, culture, and daily needs with other women in the same situation, from finding a pediatrician, a doctor, or a place where they can enjoy familiar food and make friends. "Sometimes, our women are simply looking for advice, or perhaps they have experienced a loss or are going through some dire straits. My role is to

encourage their growth by being supportive and allowing them to connect and develop solutions. This is similar to SER MUJER because they encourage me to grow my network, increase my outreach, and show me the many ways to grow my business, but leave the final decision for me to make, which is the best way to learn," adds Furlong.

Mexicanas en Dallas has proven to be a launching space for other success stories emanating from the association's membership. Yami says she enjoys seeing the initiative and innovation of other women who joined her Facebook platform, gained their wings to fly, and soared high in their unique areas of interest. "Some women enjoy painting. Others like to run or do any number of dreams-turned-reality. There are so many wonderful stories that have

come out of Mexicanas en Dallas that I feel blessed that SER MUJER can now equip to reach even more women, and we can do so much more," adds Yami.

Furlong encourages any woman reading her story to think about creating a community wherever they live by finding the courage to take the first step. "Yes, it can be scary but think about the reward of making new friends, discovering new things every day, and, best of all, not being alone or feeling lonely when surrounded by others who may be just like you! Make it even better by getting to know SER MUJER and how they can assist you, too," she concludes.





The Wow Power of Positivity!

Gaby Natale Is a Pioneer Latina of High Energy

Connecting with Gaby Natale is like grabbing hold of a high-power line running a million volts of electricity at lightning speed. She is a dynamo on a mission, empowering others to develop a mindset that overcoming obstacles may not be easy, especially at the start. However, it is possible and invigorating once you get used to the look, taste, and feel of success. Today, the media superstar is a one-person conglomerate; Emmy-winning television talent, serial entrepreneur, best-selling author, independent producer, motivational speaker, and above all, a living, breathing, fast-moving, quick-witted influencer of the masses seeking the formula to reach the peak of their potential.

“People may not believe this, but I was a very shy person at the start,” says Natale. “Success didn’t happen just like that overnight, but I had to step out and find it outside my comfort zone. Yet, as I grew as a person and a professional, I found that the common thread in everything I do is that I am breaking barriers. Whether I am competing for projects with CNN or NBC or speaking on stage for one of America’s corporations or becoming the first Latina best-selling author for the leadership division of Harper Collins, the largest publisher in the world, or addressing the audience at the 2023 SER Conference filled with wonderful Latinas just like me, I am breaking barriers. I am doing

what I love, how I love to be, and do what I do. I am embracing success, full-on, without reservation, and showing others that it begins with self-image, how you think, look, and feel about yourself,” she adds, quickly catching her breath and ready for her next staccato-speed revelation.

Natale was born in Argentina and recalled that her start happened uneventfully, by chance. She had not planned it, but she was prepared for the moment, and when she saw the opportunity, she seized it and ran with it. Natale graduated from school in 2001 with a journalism degree amid a troubled situation in her country. One day a friend invited her, and Gaby volunteered to work at a conference of American professors where the translator for the delegation canceled, and she stepped in to help. That launch took her on an extended journey of discovery. That phase of her life spanned several years. It required her to leave home and her familiar surroundings and seek her own future, doing telework and assignments for local news in Mexico. Natale says the only roles she saw for herself were doing the weather or being a news anchor, both jobs limiting her natural spontaneity. This moment of clarity compelled her to become a pioneer—that decision brought her to the United States.



Yet, for anyone who assumes life is easier for those arriving in the United States with a level of immigration protection others may not enjoy, think again. “What people do not understand or know is that some immigrants get here traumatized, deeply affected by a life of insecurity created by conditions beyond their control, including economic hyperinflation, lack of safety, riots in the streets, five presidents in ten days, 20 percent unemployment, and this environment every day, every hour, every minute and second, takes a toll on your mind, soul, and spirit. Living like this has an impact, almost like being trapped in a war zone where your very existence is uncertain. Once we are in the U.S., maybe our legal status is not the issue, but we have other, deep scars and problems that we must find a way to push past and put aside to survive.”

What Natale has achieved and she openly, ardently promotes is not being overwhelmed by what she calls “the big systemic view of the world where we feel so small and where we

feel like it's tough for us to contribute, so we feel paralyzed.” Neither does she buy into the narrative of American individualism, where it is solely up to us as single human beings against the odds to determine our fate and future. Her perspective presents a third possibility outside of focusing on the system or the individual. “When we wake up daily, some of us have our health while others are enduring pain, but life is not about only this or that. It is that despite our differences, we each choose our decisions with what we have, and every decision impacts ourselves, our community, and the world.”

Today, Natale’s comfort zone is at the stratospheric, rare air altitudes of achievement where she says, “99.99-percent of the time, I am the only Latina, not to mention immigrant, which is why I am so passionate about encouraging people from all walks of life to embrace what I call the pioneer spirit. Yes, you can do it. You may be the first or the only one in this room but give yourself a chance and trust in your creativity and your work. Start with the thought that even if you are the first



one or the only one like you in the room, you belong in every room that you step into, without question.”

The message Natale carries wherever she travels and speaks before standing-room-only audiences of Latino men and women mesmerized by her intelligent, you-can-do-anything, radiant beauty persona is that every time a person breaks barriers, they are moving the world forward. “Going from where we are to where we want to be will take an army of pioneers breaking barriers, each of us doing our own work from our different roles. My main message is that we all have been called, and we all have the responsibility to pioneer, to break barriers wherever we are. We can do it, and our community is so big and strong that we don’t realize our own impact. We don’t realize our power, so this is why I encourage people to take the step, dare to take that first step into the unknown, and be the first in what you are, where you are, and what you do.”

The notion of first has no limits in the Natale lexicon. Being first can begin in your family,

school, community, work, organization, or any of these because every time a person chooses to pioneer, they move their world forward. “The key is always to do what you choose to do with authenticity. In my case, I wanted to be an entrepreneur who could write books, produce shows, and create digital content with my voice as a woman, a Latina, and an immigrant achieving creative fulfillment not confined by a stereotypical image or put in some box that makes me one dimensional, which I am obviously not. We must each embrace all of who we are and convince ourselves that if we are going to make it, if good things are going to happen, they must not be in spite of these factors. Rather, all this and more is possible precisely because of who we are. I dare people to embrace all of who they are and all the layers that make them uniquely beautiful, different, and powerful. Seeing life change before our eyes is magical because we dared to be pioneers. That one decision can and will change the entire trajectory of your life,” says Natale.



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Ennis, Dawn. "America's Best Employers for Women." Forbes, www.forbes.com/lists/best-employers-women. Published July 26, 2022.

Welcome to the SER National Board of Directors!



Jessica Quintana

Jessica Quintana is the Executive Director of Centro CHA Inc. and a long-time Long Beach resident; she was upraised in the West Long Beach area. She attended local schools as a youth and remembered working multiple minimum-wage jobs to support her parents and family. As one of the original youth members of the former Long Beach grass-roots organization Centro de La Raza, Jessica's passion for her hometown and community organizing started at an early age. With a supportive family, Jessica began making investments back into her community as a strong, tenacious leader who is known as always willing to support the cause to ensure her neighborhood is supported with equitable, clean, and safe neighborhoods with parks to play and stay fit, the best quality education system, and certified job training with good paying jobs.

Over her 35 years of public service, she has positively impacted many lives. Jessica has worked extensively in developing community-based service programs, and campaigns specifically focused on improving community challenges, such as health, immigration, employment, higher education, violence, and social justice.

Jessica Quintana strongly advocates for young people in Long Beach, helping many transform their lives and attain their educational and career goals while becoming strong leaders in their community. She is an innovator and forerunner in the Violence Prevention Movement and is recognized by local, county, and statewide leaders as a champion for youth justice in Long Beach. Jessica has mounted much of her success from creating and implementing evidence-based violence prevention and youth development programs that save and change lives, reducing crime in Long Beach.



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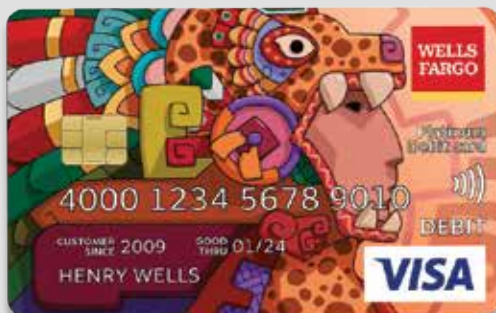




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