

Latinas Unidas celebrates with quinceañera

ENID ARBELO • CONXION EDITOR • OCTOBER 10, 2008

In 1963, at age 20, Lillian Aida Martinez came to the United States from Chile.

"Even though this country gave her a lot of opportunities, she still experienced setbacks," said Martinez's 37-year-old daughter, Linda Kelly.

Maybe it was because she didn't know anyone in the States or because she was a woman. It could have been her broken English and thick Chilean accent. No matter the reason, Martinez was met with challenges she never wanted her daughter, Linda, to face. That's why Martinez always made sure to encourage her daughter to learn perfect English and pursue a good education — while holding on to her Latin American roots.

So when Kelly learned of Latinas Unidas about three years ago, she embraced its mission — a mission that hasn't strayed since its inception 15 years ago when a group of young professional Latinas came together to create an organization that would support Hispanic women, celebrate their accomplishments but also empower them to become leaders.

That's how Latinas Unidas was born.

Now on this special anniversary, in typical Latina fashion, the organization is celebrating this coming of age with a quinceañera.

"We're ready to announce to the world that this little girl is all grown up," said Daisy Rivera Algarin, president of Latinas Unidas.

Today, the organization continues to empower and reward women in many ways, and that will all be celebrated during the 15th anniversary Reconocimiento Awards. This year the awards ceremony, which recognizes Latinas for their volunteer service, career achievement and leadership service and also rewards a young Latina who has emerged as a leader, will have a special quinceañera theme.

In the past five years, the organization has awarded more than \$60,000 to women to help with their education and career development. The award ceremony that started as a small private reception in 1995 is now an event that attracts upward of 200 people. This year's luncheon, featuring Eastman Kodak CEO Antonio Perez, will be held Nov. 12 at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Rochester and will also honor more than a dozen organizations that have helped it grow over the years.

As a Latinas Unidas founder and a previous award recipient, Margaret Sanchez, owner of Sanchez & Associates, believes the key to its success has been never straying from its focus.

"It's not just a social group. What we do to help the next person out sets us apart from other networking groups," she said.

Sanchez really believed in the mission. Maybe it was because she was raised by her grandmother, a strong Mexican woman. On a daily basis, she grew accustomed to hearing that Latinas were a driving force.

"My grandmother would say, 'You can do anything you want, become anything you want, mija,' " she recalls.

Despite the enthusiasm among the founding women, the small grass-roots effort had its share of struggles. For years, membership waned and funding was scarce. That didn't stop these Latinas.

"We've taken little tiny steps, and some years were better than others," she said. "But we never threw in the towel."

To this day, Sanchez wants other Latinas to hear the same message.

It was that same message that got new Latinas Unidas member Jackie Ruffolo involved.

"I think a good way to help is to jump right in," said Ruffolo, who is originally from Venezuela but now lives in Webster and has been with the organization about six months. One of her first introductions to the group was the ¡Soy Unica! ¡Soy Latina! Rally. The rally aims to encourage cultural pride by emphasizing the strengths in the Hispanic culture while providing young women with career and educational resources. In 2005 Latinas Unidas took the lead on the program, originally led by the Catholic Family Center.

It just made sense, says Rivera Algarin. The program was a perfect example of the organization's mission — empowering women and helping to prepare them for the future. The best part was that the rally was a chance for successful professional women to connect with the younger generation of girls from ages 7 to 17.

"I was amazed with the volume of information they covered," said Ruffolo, noting that there was even a segment on resumé building. "Some of these girls don't even have a clue what a resumé is, but if they start hearing about resúmes at 12, 13, 14 ... it will make a big difference. They will be in a better position."

Although the past 15 years have been successful, Algarin hopes to see the organization continue to grow and have its own "bricks and mortar" information center.



METT WITTMAYER staff photographer

Shirley Rivera, Iveth Reynolds, Elisa de Jesus, Kelly Mullaney, and Daisy Rivera Algarin of Latinas Unidas.



CARLOS ORTIZ staff photographer

Latinas Unidas provides educational support for girls such as Christina Brown, 18, of Spencerport, left. With her is Latinas Unidas President Daisy Rivera Algarin of Rochester.