

# Rising Latina Entrepreneurs

By Brenda Melara

no entienden los beneficios de tenerlo; ahí es que su oficina y ella misma entran en juego.

¿Qué la mantiene en pie de lucha? Thelma responde, “el hecho de que todos los días alguien sale de mi oficina con una sonrisa porque mi equipo estuvo allí para informarle sobre servicios financieros y de seguros. ¡Es muy gratificante!”. ■

Ask most entrepreneurs what it takes to operate their own business and they will most probably say it requires you to be disciplined, strong and driven. Rising to the top of the local business ladder are a group of Latinas who have very much incorporated all these traits to become who they are today in their different fields. El Tiempo New Orleans was curious to know how they took the determination to start a business in a foreign land, especially with their various ethnic backgrounds and different industry segments. ETNO also wanted to know what inspires and motivates them everyday. The following are just some of the thriving Latina entrepreneurs in this area who sat down with us to share their experiences with us. After learning what these women went through to pursue their different passions and achieve success, we hope you are inspired and perhaps look towards a journey through the business world. In our eyes these are truly rising Latina entrepreneurs. They are wonderful motivation for everyone especially for other women.

## CLAUDIA CORDOBA

Claudia Cordoba is co-owner of Mi Pueblito Restaurant in Kenner. She has resided in the New Orleans area for 25 years and came with her parents Sandra and Edgardo from Honduras because they believed it held better opportunities for the family. She is the youngest of three children including Orlando and Mauricio.

Claudia is a 2002 University of New Orleans graduate and says her inspiration is her family after witnessing both parents working very hard and teaching their children it was their responsibility to take advantage of an education. It was her mother who was born with the gift of cooking and worked many years at different ethnic restaurants. As her mother went on to selling food from her home, Claudia became part of her staff and eventually accompanied her to numerous offices and mechanic shops of-



fering her delicious home cooked meals.

After hurricane Katrina, the Hispanic population increased and allowed the family, with lots of hard work and sacrifice, to open Mi Pueblito. Family is the main ingredient to the recipe of success in running this restaurant and each family member assumes a responsibility. Claudia has dedicated herself to the daily operation and oversees details like image, food presentation and restaurant ambience. What motivates her on a daily basis is when she glances over and sees her mom working hard.

Claudia says that in her opinion it is difficult for Hispanic women to open businesses because they want to please everyone around them. That only can be their downfall, she says, and they lose themselves and forget about their goals in life. But nevertheless, women can find success when they are in what they are doing and with faith everything else falls into place. Claudia shared her mantra saying, “I believe life has stepping stones leading you closer to that something else. My success today will be my child’s stepping stone tomorrow.”

## MONICA SANCHEZ

Even as a young girl, Monica Sanchez had a strong personality. Her parents told her that she should be a lawyer because of that trait. Perhaps even more compelling than a penchant to argue her point, Monica has always been driven to do something to help people. Today, being the owner and managing partner of Cochran Latino, The Sanchez Firm gives her that opportunity on a daily basis. However, she has traveled a long road to make it where she is today.



Monica left Panama to pursue her college education in the United States at the age of 18. Although it was very difficult for her to live and study in a foreign country away from her family, she knew that this would give her the best chance at receiving a quality education. Monica studied hard at Ohio University and graduated in three years with a double degree in Economics and Political Science. She then entered Law School at Loyola University in New Orleans and graduated in 1998. While practicing full time as an attorney, Monica obtained a Masters of Law degree in International Law from Tulane University in 2003.

In her more than 10 years of practicing law, Monica remains committed to those principles she learned as a child – to help others. She has overcome a lot of obstacles to be where she is today, including being away from her parents and sisters, and her beloved Panama; as well as the devastation of Hurricane Katrina and relocating to Alabama for 9 months, while rebuilding her house in New Orleans. However, she has remained strong and committed to her work. She wants to remain an integral part of the Hispanic Community both in the State of Louisiana and in the United States.

## NORMA MORALES CASTILLO

Another lady who has set a wonderful example for the community is Norma Morales Castillo. Norma arrived in New Orleans nearly three decades with her family from Honduras. Having been here only a short time, the opportunity to buy a bakery came up and she, with the support of her husband, bought it. Knowing nothing about the bakery industry, Norma was determined to quickly learn the whole process and with the help and guidance of a



Cuban baker, six months later she had learned the business. “We were able to get the business up and going again and I learned everything from baking to being a cashier,” says Norma. Years later, because of family issues, she had to sell her bakery but Norma says she was determined to one day own it again.

Today she owns Norma’s Sweets Bakery in Kenner. She reopened

her business five years ago and now her two sons also help her in the business which she feels very proud of. She feels humbled that because of her bakery she is also helping eight other people who work for her. She works long hours but she is there everyday greeting her customers and selling cakes for all occasions, Central American and Caribbean pastries, and Mexican bread among other products. She says that her inspiration came from knowing her family believed in her, especially her mother-in-law who was a great help and gave her much support especially when she was just starting out. “I already had a son and was pregnant with my other son when I started out years ago,” she says. “Today they are here helping me out and that makes me feel good that we are all in this together. I feel very blessed,” she said.

## THELMA CEBALLOS-MEYERS

Thelma Ceballos-Meyers began her career with State Farm in 1999; it was then that she realized her agency aspirations and started to plan to own her own agency later in her career.

It was during Hurricane Katrina when Thelma realized that most Hispanics were unfamiliar with their insurance coverage, and with the huge influx of Hispanics after Katrina, she saw the need of an agent that could explain coverage in their language. She felt that her people would be better served by one of their own and not just by a person who spoke Spanish. At that moment, Thelma knew the value she could be to her community and becoming an agent was now a priority as opposed to a long term goal.

The agency opportunity was not an easy path, especially since she was also affected by Katrina’s destruction. She could relate to what people were experiencing. Thelma’s family was separated, from Baton Rouge, Ruston, Texas, and Arkansas to Oklahoma. It was a very difficult time for everyone but it gave her the energy and passion to reach out to the community.

With the obstacles that her people encounter being newcomers to the United States, she wanted to help educate them and the community on insurance products. Thelma knows that in Central America auto insurance is not required and many do not understand the benefits of it, and that is where her office and she comes in.

What keeps her going? Thelma responded, “The fact that each and everyday when someone leaves my office, they leave with a smile because my team is there to keep them informed in insurance and financial services. It’s very rewarding!” ■