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Not satisfied with breaking barriers, pioneering Latinas forge ahead

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In the 1980s the American Club, founded in Havana in 1901 and transplanted to the penthouse of the Royal Trust Tower in Miami's Little Havana neighborhood, became a haven for Cuban-American men who rose to powerful positions in government and business to network among themselves and with their Anglo male counterparts.

In the camaraderie forged by Chivas on the rocks and after-lunch cafecitos and cigars, alliances were formed, deals made, promotions promised.

"We knew we had to be a part of that scene to get anywhere, so we started showing up for lunch," remembers Aida Levitan, a prominent Miami businesswoman and one of the trailblazing advertising and marketing mavens - among them, Maria Elena Torano and the late Tere Zubizarreta - who cracked codes and integrated male-dominated South Florida business institutions.

Hispanic women have come a long way from the days when they only accompanied their husbands to social affairs, raised funds for charity and lunched with the girls.

But at the rank of CEO, president, or on boards of directors of corporate America - and in high appointed government posts such as public administration - Hispanic women are missing.

"We've come a long way, but I still think we have a long way to go," Levitan said.

"Look at the upper echelons of salaries and CEOs; you'll see almost no representation of Hispanic women," Levitan added. "Look at Burger King: Who are among the top five officials? Not Hispanic women. Look at American Airlines: Sure, they're based in Dallas, but boy, do they do a lot of business in this community, and where are the Hispanic women" in the corporate headquarters and board of directors?

Nationally, the picture is not any rosier: Only 2.6 percent of Fortune 500 CEOs are women, and they hold about 15 percent of the board seats.

In Fortune 500 companies, 3.1 percent of board seats were held by Hispanics - that's 172 of more than 5,000 seats. Of that number, only 44 seats were held by Latinas, less than 1 percent.

"Some of these women held more than one seat so some serve on two or three different boards," said Cristina Lopez, president of the National Hispana Leadership Institute in Washington. "When you count actual numbers of women, only 20 to 25 Latinas are on (Fortune 500) corporate boards."

There are no Latina CEOs in Fortune 500 companies, a scenario unlikely to change in the short term. "They're not in the pipeline for this to change any time soon," Lopez said.

To address the underrepresentation of Latinas, the 23-year-old National Hispana Leadership Institute - founded by the Miami duo of Torano, a Cuban-American business owner and presidential appointee, and Raquel Cohen, a Peruvian-American psychiatrist who was in the first class of women at Harvard Medical School - has developed a series of training and development programs specially tailored to Hispanic women.

"Women can do anything they want to do, but I know that there are tremendous barriers," Cohen said. "It's the barriers that need to be changed, not the women. To get through the barriers, they need the skills."

The institute's programs take into account the particular needs of Hispanic women such as commitment to family - which hasn't changed despite their increasing presence in the workforce - and gives them access to top-notch training opportunities.

The organization's executive leadership program, the most well-known and competitive, is broken down into four

separate, weeklong segments to limit the time away from the home base. Candidates must have at least 10 years of professional experience and have a track record of leadership in their community.

The first week is spent in California undergoing "introspective" self-assessment activities such as taking a strength-finder test. The second week focuses on public leadership and takes place at the Kennedy School at Harvard University. For the third, the women choose a week at one of the three campuses of the Center for Creative Leadership - North Carolina, San Diego or Denver - where they interact with executives from corporate America. The last week is spent in Washington, immersed in public policy issues and meeting government officials and members of Congress.

Another program for emerging professionals, ages 17 to 22, is aimed at helping Hispanic women begin careers in nonprofit organizations, which are expected to generate 500,000 to 800,000 jobs in the next 15 years with the retirement of baby boomers who have held those jobs.

Another program targeted at women aged 24 to 34 seeks to increase the number of Latinas in leadership roles in nonprofit organizations by exposing them to management and leadership training.

"There is tremendous opportunity in nonprofits, but we need to build the pipeline," Lopez said.

The goal of all the programs is to "make our women aware of what could be achieved if they dare look beyond their current realities," Torano said.

Plenty of role models of powerful Latinas can be found in South Florida, which is unique in that Hispanics have become the mainstream culture in the past 30 years and hold powerful elected offices. Last week, a Cuban-American woman, Aminda Marques Gonzalez, was named executive editor of The Miami Herald Media Co. - the first Hispanic woman to hold the post and a featured speaker at the NHLI conference.

The powerful Latin Builders Association, once a male bastion, is led by Noelia Moreno, co-owner of Hialeah-based Moralmar Kitchen Cabinets.

From where she sits as chair of the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce and a senior vice president at Bank of America, Maria C. Alonso sees a different picture of South Florida and how Hispanic women fit into the corporate culture.

"We are not a corporate headquarter town," Alonso said. "That would be more in line with an Atlanta. We are more mid-size corporations and small businesses."

Women like her, Alonso added, grew up with "seeing Hispanic women in leadership positions."

She named Remedios Daaz-Oliver, the president and CEO of her own company, All American Containers, and Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, both of whom are being honored with an NHLI Mujer Award for their achievements.

"Our reality in Miami is warped because of sheer numbers (of Hispanics) here," she said.

Alonso's divorced mother, a nurse, owned and operated an adult living facility and sent her daughter to the all-girls Our Lady of Lourdes Academy.

"I grew up thinking that it was normal to be successful in business," said Alonso, who is market manager for corporate social responsibility for Bank of America in Miami-Dade and Monroe counties. "You are surrounded by people that do. The message is 'You do and you can.' I saw that at home, and it was reinforced in my schooling."

Originally a University of Miami-trained engineer, she attributes her career success to mentors.

"I think the mentorship part is critical in my own personal and professional development," she said. "I've been fortunate to have had great mentors along the way, both male and female, Hispanic and non-Hispanics."

Irma Becerra-Fernandez, another successful South Florida Latina, grew up in a traditional home in Puerto Rico with the expectation she would get a university education and build a family. Her career moves, however, were supposed to take a back seat to family.

"I struggled early on with what was it going to mean for me to excel in my profession and at the same time excel as a mom," Becerra-Fernandez said. "The priority for me was my family. I thought about that when I was back in college. Will I have to quit my job to raise my kids? I didn't have a clear answer to that. Most Latinas still struggle today with that."

By staying open and flexible, Becerra-Fernandez carved three careers in male-dominated fields and raised two children who are now grown and building their own. Her son holds a finance degree and works in New York. Her

daughter is studying economics at Boston College.

Along the way Becerra-Fernandez discovered that her choices about career and family didn't need to be so black-and-white, that either-or. Rather, she saw that she needed to manage her life by adopting business practices like "outsourcing" and building "a support system."

Her Cuban mother, a stay-at-home mom, helped with child care. So did a sister. She participated in carpools to cut her driving time.

"I outsourced the cooking," she said, laughing. "Monday was taco night, Tuesday rib night (and kids ate free), Wednesday pizza night. I never was a good cook, so why not have someone else do it?"

Her family time was spent on "valuable things - reading the kids a story, putting them to sleep, doing homework, staying in touch with teachers, being part of their social weekends."

Her strategies worked.

Becerra-Fernandez was the first woman to earn a doctorate in electrical engineering at Florida International University. She worked at Florida Power & Light for six years, and after she was asked to teach the staff statistics, she discovered she loved teaching and became an information systems professor at the university level.

Now, as the director of the Center for Entrepreneurship at FIU's College of Business, Becerra-Fernandez is organizing a venture capital conference that will pair investors with Latin American businesses in mid-November.

"Maybe I like the challenges and I'm a survivor," Becerra-Fernandez said.

So are the women who charted the course for many like her.

Thirty years later, Levitan and Torano can laugh when they remember the stories of how they built successful careers in a South Florida mostly run by men.

One of their favorites: How they tried to get the Asociacion de Hombres de Empresa to change its "sexist name." When it didn't, they formed their own group, the National Coalition of Hispanic American Women, and worked hard to give the organization and the women in it public exposure.

"We all had our own style," said Torano, who ended up with a presidential appointment by the Carter administration that changed her life and opened doors in Washington.

Levitan now heads ArtesMiami, a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting South Florida artists and culture. She also serves on the 23-member commission to study the feasibility of creating a national museum dedicated to the history, heritage and contributions of Hispanics in the United States.

Torano and Cohen are semi-retired, but after seven years of studying Buddhism, Torano says she's "back" and working on a plan to expand the reach and influence of the National Hispana Leadership Institute and take the organization "to the next level."

"There is still so much to do," Torano said.