



THE NATIONAL HISPANA LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE

Training Latinas to help improve the economic, social and political circumstances of Latinos nationwide

BY CECILE B. CORRAL

Neddy Perez was steadily climbing the corporate ladder, newly hired as a communications supervisor at her company's Miami offices, when she noticed she was an anomaly on the management team—and the realization scared her.

"I was at a national meeting [regarding] our United Way campaign and I was one of three women of about 50 people, and I was the only Latina," she recalled. "The rest were predominantly white males, and the other two women were

"Mujeres Forjando la Paz Mundial" or Women Forging Global Peace by Sina Sutter, www.sinasutter.com

www.mbawomen.org



"Tres Generaciones" or "Three Generations" by Laura Lopez Cano. www.lauralopezcano.com

white females. There were only three African American men in the room. And that was my first real introduction to corporate America, and my first realization of the real lack of Latinas in corporate America."



Neddy Perez

It was then that Perez realized she needed to take action. Being the first in her immediate family to go to college, earn a masters degree and work in corporate America, she recognized the landscape desperately needed more up-and-coming executives from backgrounds like hers, essentially Latinas.

"I really needed some mentoring and wanted to see if there were other Latinas like me out there," she said.

Her first step was to turn to the National Hispana Leadership Institute (NHLI) - an organization she first heard about five years earlier from fellow students while she was earning her Masters degree (a dual major in international business and in human resources,) at Nova Southeastern University.

"I was in the stage of my life where I had progressed further than anyone else in my family and I hadn't had a lot of interaction with a lot of other senior-level Hispanic females. I had role models, but all of them were Caucasian or African American. I was looking for a Latina role model to learn from," she says.

NHLI did that for her, and continues to, six years and counting.

This gender- and ethnic-specific organization, which this year celebrates its 19th anniversary, is "the premier leadership training for Latinas in this country," as described by the organization's president, Marisa Rivera-Albert. "We are here to educate, train and empower Latinas across the country."

Based in Washington D.C., NHLI's objective is to train Latinas who aspire to improve the economical, social and political well-being of Hispanics nationwide. It achieves this by offering different training programs for Hispanic women as young as college students to seasoned professionals.

"We select business owners, Latinas who are often politically oriented, really a whole mixture of different backgrounds—lawyers, academics, etc.—but all of them have an important component in common, and that is to see progress in the Latina community," Rivera-Albert explains. "To participate they must be active in making changes in their communities or in their states."

NHLI was recognized last year with three major awards for its many successes. They are: the Leadership Award from the Independent Sector, a major leadership forum for charities, foundations and corporate giving programs; the Distinguished Alumni Award from the Center for Creative Leadership, considered a top provider of executive education worldwide; and the United States Hispanic Leadership Institute's Cesar Chavez Community Service Award, which was presented to Rivera-Albert in recognition of her leadership in advocating civil rights, social and economic justice, and equal opportunity.

NHLI PROGRAMS

NHLI has four training programs.



They are the four-week Executive Leadership program, for participants who are 26 and older and already working in their fields; the Latinas Learning to Lead youth program, for college students; the Latina Empowerment conferences, which are one-day events held regionally; and the NHLI Leadership Training and Mujer Awards conference, which is a year-end, one-day program held annually at different U.S. cities with large Hispanic populations.

Latinas Learning to Lead

This youth program for college students regularly attracts about 300 applicants annually, but the program can only carry 22 each cycle. To qualify, the chosen few "must be involved in their communities and see themselves as agents of change," Rivera-Albert says.

Latina Empowerment Conferences

The empowerment conference is the most recently created program, begun last year, and is currently in five major U.S. cities. Open to all ages, Rivera-Albert says it consists of a panel of Latinas “sharing their secrets of success, and my presentation on preparing Latinas for leadership positions.” Also, the Gallup organization is retained to help the women on the multi-faceted demands of leadership, she adds.

Executive Leadership Program

This four-week executive leadership program takes its participants to four major cities over a four-week period and prepares them personally and professionally on leadership development issues. Class of 2005 graduate Toti Cadavid of Denver offers her own summary of the four-week executive leadership program, based on the positive effect it had on balancing her personal life, her Hispanic marketing business, her three children, her husband, and her avid community involvement. “The reason this is the best leadership program in the country is because of the different ways each of the weeks challenge your leadership skills,” she explains.

The first week at the California retreat, “gives you a look at yourself inside and out and gives you answers to why you are who you are and how you got there,” she says.

The second week, which is at Harvard University’s JFK School of Government, challenges you more at the professional and managerial level, “giving you tools necessary to manage others better and to help you resolve work related challenges.” The third week is at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL), which has three locations in the U.S. (Greensboro, N.C., La Jolla, California and Colorado Springs, Colorado). It’s a time when participants take part in the Leadership Development Program, “and we learn about ourselves as leaders, about the essence of our personalities and how to deal with the many different types of personalities at our work environments,” says Cadavid. During the fourth week, she says, “we are challenged at the community level when we go to Washington D.C. to talk to our congressional representatives. We are then challenged to think of our community and see how our actions and beliefs affect millions of people.”

Rivera-Albert adds that about 10 percent of the Latinas who participate in the Executive Leadership Program have run, or are running for, public office, “and they continue to do so. It is thrilling when they realize that one of the best ways to impact change is by being in office.”



Marisa Rivera-Albert, President and CEO of NHLI, presenting at the U.S. Department of State.

As it closes in on two decades, NHLI’s goal is to train “every walking Latina out there who wants training, and to see more Latinas in positions of influence. Although we’ve seen progress, it has been painfully slow.” Rivera-Albert notes that the U.S. has not yet seated a Latina in the Senate, and so far there have only been seven Latinas in Congress.

Neddy Perez was part of the Executive Leadership program’s Class of 2000, and her main rewards from the program were in her professional life. “It helped me get centered and more focused on my strengths. I now feel more comfortable going into a room and being in charge, even if I am the only Latina at the table,” Perez says. “It helped me grow personally and professionally, and it gave me the tools and skills I needed to share my ideas and to express myself in a way that would get heard.”

It also earned her a promotion, thanks to the community project she created as part of her graduation requirement for the Executive Leadership Program. She chose a project that would help close the digital gap between minorities—mainly Latinos and African Americans—and the white population.

“Middle America has access to technology, but lower income Hispanics and African Americans often don’t, and the idea behind my project was to put computers in school districts and in community organizations that serve minorities,” she explains.

At the time, she was working in the IT division of Shell Oil. The company was recycling more than 20,000 computers throughout its U.S. offices.

“I came up with a plan to take many of the computers that would be sold or destroyed and convince Shell to run

a small pilot program that would donate computers into the community.”

As result of that pilot, Shell has donated more than 5,000 computers to target areas throughout the U.S.

To Perez’s surprise, the chairman of the board of parent company Royal/Dutch Shell took note of her efforts and the success of the program and ordered it adopted internationally by the company in more than 140 countries.

“And the important thing to note is that I would never have been able to create this project had I not gone through NHLI,” she says. “I didn’t have the skill set or the confidence to conceive such a project or implement it. But going through the NHLI program enabled me to get it done.” Soon after, she was promoted to manager, working from Shell Oil’s corporate headquarters.

Recently, Perez has moved into a new role as senior director of external diversity relations for Sodexho, a food and facilities management company. She is based in Gaithersburg,

Her needs were quite the opposite. She wanted to learn how to juggle her 70-hour work week with her many community-related commitments and her family at home.

“NHLI touches some people at a professional level and it guides them in their careers, but for me it was all personal—I needed a change in my personal life,” she recalls.



Toti Cadavid

She was “burning out,” lacking sleep, working weekends, frequently attending community events during the week and caring for her children.

“I really forgot all about Toti,” says Cadavid, who owns and operates Denver-based Hispanic advertising agency Xcelente Marketing and Advertising.

“I’m a workaholic and have been for past 16 years, and what I got out of the [NHLI] program was that I really needed to balance my life between work, family and myself.” Her three children are ages 14, 4 and 2. Cadavid is a member of



Celebrating the 2005 Leadership Training and Mujer Awards Conference, The Class of 2005 (center), Latina Empowerment Conference

Maryland. “One of things I do is to develop community partnerships, and NHLI is one of the organizations I partner with because I know the caliber of women is outstanding,” she said. Perez continues to draw from her experiences with NHLI as she looks for talent for her division.

“Because I know the quality of NHLI’s program, I know the women going through it represent about four percent of the United States’ top Latinas,” she says. “And I try to use NHLI as a resource for filling new positions, particularly at the executive level.”

Another success story stemming from NHLI’s programs is Toti Cadavid.

This working mother seemingly had it all—her own marketing and advertising business, a high-profile husband who works in the mayor’s cabinet, and three young children—when she decided she needed to enroll in NHLI’s four-week executive leadership program.

She wasn’t looking for a career booster.

several local boards and councils in her region.

“The program challenged me at the personal level, showing me how to look at the reason why, behavior-wise, I acted in some ways versus others. The program opens up a whole different perspective for helping you look at yourself and why you are where you are. It challenges you to see whether you’re at the point where you want to be or if you want to go somewhere else.”

Since graduating from the program last year, Cadavid said she is exercising more, leaving her office earlier and enjoying “a quality life with my children and husband.”

“Thanks to NHLI, I learned it is OK to rest and have ‘off’ time. Most of the people in my class were already leaders, we just needed balance in our lives. Too many of us were already there at the leadership level. But what the program did for us was about regression—getting us back in touch with ourselves. We are already proactive, and this told us, ‘hey, stop, you don’t need to be everything to everybody to be a true leader.”