

Leadership course sharpens Latinos' advocacy skills

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Posted: Nov. 26, 2006

Nelsinia Ramos started her advocacy work as the mother of a daughter with autism. Finding educational and other services for a child with disabilities can be complex and confounding to parents, especially if they are native Spanish speakers, she said.

She not only found agencies to help, but went to work as the Latino coordinator with Wisconsin FACETS (Family Assistance Center for Education, Training and Support), an organization that assists children and adults with disabilities. She also helped start Alianza, a support group for Latino families with children with disabilities.

Now she's working to complete a Spanish language documentary designed to help others who have children with disabilities. It tells the stories of various Latino families and details how they struggled through the diagnoses and found the support and assistance they needed.

"It's designed to let families know they're not alone and to empower them," Ramos said.

The video had been in the works for some time as a FACETS and Alianza project but remained unfinished until Ramos joined the Latino Nonprofit Leadership Program. A requirement of the program was to undertake a community project; she chose to take on completion of the video, with the help of other volunteers.

It is just one of 10 community projects undertaken by the 21 people in the Latino leadership program, a joint project of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Roberto Hernandez Center and Cardinal Stritch University's leadership program.

The program is part of a national effort started four years ago by Hispanics in Philanthropy "to improve the human capital of non-profit organizations that serve Latino constituents," said Enrique Figueroa, director of the Roberto Hernandez Center.

With money from the philanthropy fund and local foundations, the program was launched last year as a training ground for leaders to serve the growing Latino community, he said.

The projects range from creating a Latino think tank and workshops on cultural competency, to encouraging Latino students to study abroad and setting up seminars on

Leadership Course



Photo/[Karen Sherlock](#)

Nelsinia Ramos' advocacy began with her search for services for her 9-year-old daughter, Jennifer Rojas, who has autism.,

preventing fraud. They are just one component of the 10-month program. "The common thread is that all the participants have a genuine commitment to better provide some services to Latino constituents and they all feel they want to expand their skills," Figueroa said.

In addition to the project, the sessions include a roster of guest speakers, reading assignments and seminars on self-discovery , developing as a leader, management, financial and organizational development, public relations, crisis management, board governance and fund development.

Twenty-one people graduated from the program this month.

Ramos, who is also working on a degree in social work, said the program showed her the possibilities.

"Seeing Latinos in top executive positions was eye-opening," she said. "It shows that people who have been immigrants and didn't have a lot of money can do it. It was very powerful."

Freddy Garnica, with the Southside Organizing Committee, has worked to establish CAAR, (Car Accessories Automotive and Repair), an association of about 16 businesses. He hopes it will do snow removal for the shops' elderly neighbors, work to keep loud music down and improve their building facades and lighting.

"Sometimes people complain about car shops - parking, loud music and speeding cars - and so I thought the association could work on that by promoting help and respect," he said. For Veronica Mancheno-Robinson, who came to the U.S. 10 years ago from Ecuador, the leadership program helped her clarify who she is, what she wants to do and how she fits into the Latino community.

She now works with a new newspaper, Fronteras, in the Racine-Kenosha area, but has done a lot of jobs, including sewing cushions and cleaning houses. "After I came to the U.S. I assimilated into the mainstream culture to the point my Spanish began to suffer," she said. "I had a cultural imbalance."

"I've learned to come to terms with both being here and part of this culture, which has benefited me and been a gift, but also the self that I brought from Ecuador and that I can't be without," she said.

She's working on her undergraduate degree to teach secondary education and is learning French.

Her project for the program involved a partnership with Casa Guadalupe in West Bend to establish a bilingual, bicultural library in a church that serves Latinos to foster literacy.