

# ESMERALDA HETRICK



## LATINO LEADERSHIP INFLUENCING THE NEXT GENERATION

by Mikell Worley

The energy level rises whenever Esmeralda Hetrick walks into a room. She serves as an advocate for the children in our community, and her enthusiasm is contagious. On the day she met with me, before she even sat down, she handed me flyers about upcoming events for *Estamos Unidos De Pennsylvania* (United We Stand of Pennsylvania). She is currently the president of that organization and has been involved in it for the past six years. “We help to improve the lives of the Hispanic children in our community through education,” she explains. “We encourage them to learn about their culture through education, arts, music, and dance.

“So many of our young people don’t see how they fit into the community,” continues Esmeralda, who is also called Eszi. “Many don’t understand their culture or see past their own small radius. Each one has a gift, a beauty, but they don’t realize it. Self-esteem is a huge issue.” As a child, Eszi lived in government housing in Galveston, Texas, and has an empathy for those who are in “survival mode.”

*Estamos Unidos*, is a non-profit organization founded in 2002 by Hector Oritiz soon after he emigrated from Ecuador. “He said there was much work to be done,” remembers Esmeralda. Oritiz wanted to enlist her help with *Estamos Unidos*, but Eszi resisted. “He continued to ask for my involvement, and I finally agreed to come to a meeting. People were giving their time and energy to help the young people,” she reflects. “You can’t deny a group like that. I’m proud to be part of it. We don’t complain that we have to vol-

unteer on a Friday night or a Saturday. We don’t even think about it. It is something that we want to do.”

As a former president of *Estamos Unidos* Hector Ortiz notes that, “Esmeralda is cautious, prudent, passionate, and very committed to the community. She first checked the organization’s trust and leadership credibility before getting involved. Through her leadership *Estamos Unidos* was fortunate to find a way to maintain new avenues in helping our kids.”

The success of the program depends on a combination of caring and action. “Passion, from the heart, and logic, from the head, are both needed to make a program successful,” she comments. “You can really care and want to help but if you don’t have action, nothing gets done.”

Esmeralda doesn’t work with young people to impress them, but to lend them her support. The benefits are significant and by no means one-sided. “You come back learning more about yourself because of their honesty,” she observes. “Each of us is different and unique. We bring a variety of issues. Each of us needs to support and mentor our young people so that they can find their gifts and become successful, contributing members of the community.

“It is gratifying work. It brings tears to my eyes. During the holidays at the Christmas party our own Dauphin County coroner plays Santa. A very skinny Santa!” she laughed. “He needs lots of extra padding!” (The coroner is her husband, Graham Hetrick.)

She is very concerned with the local politics that stand in the way of a united community effort on



behalf of local youth. “If we are to help our people, our children, we need to see past politics. We need to put aside our geographic roots. It doesn’t matter if we are from Puerto Rico, Mexico, Cuba, or elsewhere. It matters that we as a people need to be caring and respectful of our Latino chil-

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dren,” Esmeralda states passionately. “We need to collectively provide a safe environment for them and help them obtain the resources they need to become successful.”

As the Latino population continues to grow and diversify in our area, there is an increased need for more representation on the governmental stage. Lack of Latino leadership, distrust against Latino groups, lack of communication tools, lack of emphasis for Latino youth, housing, training, and unemployment are some of the most prevalent themes that surfaced in the Latino Community Needs Assets and Assessment Project prepared for the United Way of the Capital Region in July 2007. Much of the work being done through *Estamos Unidos de Pennsylvania* is to improve these areas, but it only scratches the surface.

“We need a dream – a road map,” argues Esmeralda. “We need to know where we are going and to have a visual idea of what it will look like. We need more people to work with us and to contribute to support our goals.” Practical things need to be done, and Esmeralda is proud of the scholarships that have been given through the organization. Last year *Estamos Unidos* delivered nine scholarships (six scholarships for full-time students of

\$1,000 each and three scholarships for part-time students for \$500 each). This year’s fund raising dinner is scheduled for September 13, 2008. Additional information on this program as well as others can be seen on the organization’s website: [www.estamosunidospa.org](http://www.estamosunidospa.org).

Values and spirituality have provided a strong base for Esmeralda throughout her life, and she feels many of our children are missing this foundation. “There must be a strong spiritual base, regardless of what you call ‘your God.’ When we are in distress, we need to be able to call out for help. I say, ‘Dear Lord, help me.’ And I have faith that He will,” comments Esmeralda. “I can’t imagine what it would be like not to have anywhere to turn. As a child I memorized the Lord’s Prayer. It used to give me strength when I was growing up and I still use it today. Every child needs to have a safe spiritual place to turn for reassurance and comfort.”



Education served as an important aspect of developing Esmeralda’s spiritual belief systems. “My Mother knew enough to send us to different denominational churches so that we could be educated about different points of view,” notes the activist. “With that information we could make our own judgment about what was valuable for each of us.”

Caring for up and coming generations is nothing new to Eszi, who was the oldest daughter in her family and grew up looking after her younger siblings. As a youth she babysat, sold Mary Kay Cosmetics, and joined her brothers in collecting coke bottles for extra money. She was an entrepreneur at an early age. “I didn’t get up to play,” she says, “I got up to work!”

Continually doing more than expected is Esmeralda’s trademark and it has served her well. She currently works as the client manager at Highmark Blue Shield, and in 2007 she earned

an MBA at Eastern University. She is a Leadership Harrisburg Area graduate and was recognized as a Woman of Excellence in 2005. Esmeralda graced the cover of the January 2006 issue of *Harrisburg Magazine* as one of Harrisburg’s “Movers and Shapers.” She has won beauty contests, starred in television and radio shows, and been the opening singing act for television and theater. Music and singing are her passions.

“Music is the power that is the international language,” observes Eszi, who is known for beginning her speeches with a funny song to get the groups’ attention. “Music is a common bond. Our youth respond to music. We all do. If there were more positive messages in the music they listen to, it would help improve their self-esteem,” she adds.

“We have steered away from our spiritual base,” notes Esmeralda. “If we each give substance and value, we will slowly get it back. If

we give our time and support to the children, we must expect that they take that gift and then pass it on to someone else.” Esmeralda Hetrick exemplifies that philosophy. If others will follow her example of investing their time, resources, talents, and service in the youth of our area, the return will be a better community for everyone. ❖



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