



Lill

Lillian Escobar-Haskins is a catalyst. She uses her unique flair and style to combine people and ideas, and the results have made a significant impact on our community and beyond. “The basis of everything I do is to seek solutions and build bridges,” explains Lillian Escobar-Haskins. She is the director of the Office of Policy for the Pennsylvania Department of Health and is an advocate for change. “I was a child of the sixties. Being part of the activism of the sixties formed the basis of my passion for human services and the core of who I am professionally.

“My parents are both from Puerto Rico. My father only had an eighth grade education and had to work two jobs most of his life to make enough money to support the family. My mother completed sixth grade and was primarily a homemaker. I was born and raised in New York City. As the oldest and only girl in a traditional Latino family with three younger brothers, I spent a lot of time in the house doing chores while my brothers were allowed to run around,” remembers Lillian. “Growing up, I had no perception of going

would not be welcome back. Even so, Lillian took the plunge and moved out. “Several months later one of my brothers was beaten up by a gang,” recalls Escobar-Haskins. “There was no way that I wasn’t going to go back to see him. When I hesitantly approached the door at my home and knocked, my father looked at me and yelled to my mother, ‘Hilda! Your daughter’s here.’”

Escobar-Haskins stayed in college for two years before dropping out. “As the result of my upbringing, I didn’t appreciate the value of an education to improve my future. For me, going to college represented freedom. At first I partied a lot.” However, she re-enrolled in 1971, and while at Queens College, Lillian met her husband. In 1972 she quit school to be a full-time mother. By the summer of 1977 the couple had two girls, a boy, and Lillian was pregnant with her fourth child. “We were living in a high rise apartment in the Bronx. My daughter’s godparents had moved to Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and they encouraged us to consider joining them because it was a better place to raise kids. My husband traveled

Lillian Escobar-Haskins

CATALYST FOR HOLISTIC HEALTH

By Mikell Worley

to college or having a career. My family expected me to live at home with them until I got married and moved into my own home to start a family.”

After graduating high school in 1967, Lillian went to work at an insurance agency. “There’s an expression that says, ‘life is what happens to you while you’re making plans.’ Even though I had never been guided to go to college by my family, teachers, or guidance counselors, I had an opportunity that changed my life’s direction. I received a letter in the mail about a program called SEEK (Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge) for disadvantaged youth. It was created to level the playing field in terms of inequality based on economic circumstances,” says Lillian. “I was required to take a test. I passed and in 1967 I enrolled Queens College.”

When Lillian announced to her family that she planned to move into a dorm room in New York City and attend college, her father made it clear that if she walked out of the door she

there, found a job, and returned to move us to the area. My youngest son was born in Lancaster.”

Not long after that, Lillian decided she wanted to pursue a career. So in 1981 she took a job as a drug and alcohol bilingual case manager even though she didn’t have a degree. It didn’t take long for her to realize that she wanted to do more. That same year she signed up for the Lincoln University Masters in Human Services Program that combined work experience with life experience toward earning a degree. In 1983 “at 34 years old I earned a master’s degree in human services while holding a full-time job and raising four children. My husband and I worked different shifts for years to ensure that one of us was always home to take care of the children. He took over the household so that I could get my degree,” says Escobar-Haskins.

“Once I had my education, so many doors opened for me. It is important to share that lesson. Many young Latina and



African-American girls are not exposed to all that is available to them. We need to provide them with more opportunities. And not just girls; all young people, especially minority youth, need to be exposed to opportunities that will improve their lives.” Lillian is proud to be one of the women highlighted in a book released in 2007 by The Pennsylvania Commission for Women’s (PCW) Role Model program entitled *Voices: African American Women and Latina Women Share Their Stories of Success*. All of the women featured in the book “had to struggle. Hopefully our stories will make [young people] think before they make choices that will make achieving success difficult for them. PCW donated copies to every county and public school library serving students in grades six through nine.”

Lillian takes a holistic approach to success. “We can’t make it in our professional life if we have psychological or emotional problems. In 1986, I designed and delivered a four week career development program for women. The first two weeks were spent on personal/emotional development, and then we were prepared to spend the next two weeks on careers. We had every kind of woman. Women from rural Lancaster County joined women from the inner city. Others had lived affluent life styles but were abandoned by husbands that they had supported for years. They were white, Latino, and African American. When the surface was peeled away they understood that they were more alike than different,” observes Escobar-Haskins.

Never one to grow complacent and always ready to find new ways to engage positive change, Lillian decided to run for the 96th District State House seat in 1988. She was the first woman and the first minority to run for that position. Lillian surprised everyone when she came within a little more than 100 votes of unseating a 16 year incumbent. “Despite that achievement, that race clarified for me that I am more of a political activist than a politician,” says Escobar-Haskins. In 1989 Lillian was appointed executive director of the Governor’s Advisory Commission on Latino Affairs and worked in that position until 1995. She served as advisor to Governor Robert P. Casey, his cabinet, and state government agencies on social, educational, health/mental health, political, and economic issues affecting local communities.

Her work during that time led to requests from local communities for her services. As a result, in 1996 she and her husband started Alegre Ad-

vertising where they offered marketing and graphic design services. By 2000, in response to requests for her expertise in community development, the business changed to Alegre Research and began conducting comprehensive community assessments leading to recommendations on a host of issues affecting minority populations.

Then in 2007, Lillian Escobar-Haskins returned to state government as the policy director for the Department of Health. She talks passionately about health concerns, especially as they impact our children. “The epidemic of childhood obesity is a major concern. The U.S. and many other developed countries are impacted by this worldwide epidemic. Sedentary life styles are a factor and the lack of adequate physical education in schools is a grave concern. Studies now tie physical activity to academic success,” stresses Escobar-Haskins.

“Obese children are more likely to be bullied. They are more likely to suffer from chronic disease including diabetes and heart disease,” continues Lillian. “This is the first generation that likely won’t outlive their parents. There are economic factors that will have an impact on all of us.”

African Americans have the highest levels of obesity with Latinos as the second highest. There are several contributing factors. “These populations are disproportionately poor. It is more expensive to eat healthy foods. They often live in neighborhoods that aren’t as safe for physical activity. And many of our traditional diets are higher in fats,” remarks Lillian.

As the policy person for the Department of Health, Lillian works diligently to improve our community on many levels. She is action oriented, an advocate, and has a passionate and powerful voice for the betterment of all people. Pennsylvania can be proud to have such a knowledgeable and compassionate voice campaigning for a healthier commonwealth.

As the mother of four, and the grandmother of nine, Lillian is highly motivated. “My grandchildren certainly keep my commitment alive to make things better, since it is their present and their future.” ❖

Mikell Worley is the founder and president of Mikell’s Treasures. She has spent more than 20 years designing and delivering self-improvement trainings, has had several cover stories in various magazines, and recently illustrated her first children’s book. She is an advocate for women and children.