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CORETTA SCOTT KING

Women For Diversity Award Winner



*Yolanda
Perez-Rivera*

by Mikell Worley

In her professional work as a counselor as well as in her personal life, the force that drives Yolanda Perez-Rivera is a reverence for all human beings. In everything she does, Yolanda applies the Biblical principles and strategies that she learned in Puerto Rico where she was born. Perez-Rivera attributes her compassion and skills to God. “The work of the Lord is in my heart,” she says. “It is not about preaching, but about living day to day with love. One of my favorite quotes by St. Francis of Assisi expresses it well, ‘Preach the gospel at all times and when necessary use words.’”

Yolanda Perez-Rivera

Yolanda attributes her empathy for people to the lessons she learned while growing up in Puerto Rico. She is a natural redhead with blue eyes and very fair skin and looks different from others in her family and community. Perez-Rivera often felt that she did not fit in, and she is now committed to helping others who feel disconnected.

“Puerto Ricans are a mixed race,” observes Yolanda. “There is a mix of white Spaniards, black Africans, and indigenous people native to the Island. There is racial prejudice but the more notable difference is in class. The island was colonized by Spain as a monarchy. Consequently class, nobility, and hierarchy are important.”

According to Perez-Rivera, class levels are not always determined by money. Prestige or name, or even the way a person carries him or herself can determine their position. “The first impression and the way you look on the outside will influence the way you will be treated by others,” notes Yolanda. “We have the same thing here in the mainland. Consider the ‘Power Suit’ in the career realm, the concept is similar. It is not politically correct to talk about it, but there is no doubt that the way a person dresses has an impact on how they are perceived. We only have one chance to make a good first impression. The way a person presents themselves the first time is the way they will be remembered from then on. It is important to have confidence and present yourself in a positive manner. Nurturing the spirit and the soul is essential for developing strength to deal with these issues in a different environment, culture, and language.”

Yolanda’s family considered education to be very important. “My mother was very intelligent but had a disadvantage by not having an education,” says Perez-Rivera. “She was determined that my two sisters and I have all the advantages an education could provide. My father expected that I would go to college and was very supportive of me.” Yolanda earned a bachelor’s degree in secondary education and a master’s degree in counseling from the University of Puerto Rico.

Yolanda married a Puerto Rican Air Force officer, and they moved to the mainland United States. The military moved the young family all over the country, and as a result, all four of their children (Lizzie, Carlos, Jorge, and Camille) were born in different states. Yolanda has observed how minorities are treated in all areas of the nation. “We lived in military housing in a small town in Oregon,” she remembers. “A fence divided our house from the American Indian reservation. Their living conditions were oppressive and deplorable.

“In Mobile, Alabama, in 1962 they still had separate water fountains – one for blacks and one for whites. We saw inequity and discrimination in all areas of the country – in all walks of life by all sorts of people.”

Then in 1971 the Perez-Rivera family returned to Puerto Rico where Yolanda’s husband attended law school. The couple divorced shortly after he graduated. Yolanda’s two oldest children were attending college when she returned to graduate school. In addition to the master’s degree in counseling, she earned a graduate certificate in sexual education.

In 1986 Yolanda was hired as an instructor/counselor at Harrisburg Area Community College (HACC). In this capacity, she encourages students to show compassion to themselves as well as to others. She urges them to reflect on their talents and strengths in order to build lives of value and dignity. For more than two decades she has guided, advised, and mentored hundreds of students from diverse ethnic, cultural, and language backgrounds who are now leaders in our community.

In addition to her professional life, Yolanda generously shares her time and talents throughout the community as a volunteer, mentor, organizer, activist, and citizen. “Before I get involved in any activity or organization I pray. ‘Will I be able to help others? Will it contribute something positive to my life?’ If I feel that it is in God’s will and will strengthen my spirit while helping others, I will get involved,” says Yolanda. She actively participates in her church and chairs the Education Committee of *Estamos Unidos de Pennsylvania, Incorporated*, an organization dedicated to the education, the advocacy, and the mentoring of the Latino/ Hispanic community as well as the community at large. She currently is the acting president of the Latino Hispanic Professional Association (LHPA), that in partnership with Dauphin County Library System recently inaugurated the first ever Latino Library Corner at the Kline Library in Harrisburg.

Yolanda continues to work against neglect and abuse through her involvement with the YWCA and her position on the board of directors of the Pennsylvania Family Support Alliance. She has also served as a liaison through statewide appointments as well as through local efforts to create understanding and respect among all peoples.

Two of her children live locally while the other two reside out of state. Yolanda also has nine precious grandchildren. Perez-Rivera’s influence extends well beyond her biological relations, however. Her extended family includes people of all cultures and backgrounds, all ages and stages in life.

The lessons Yolanda learned as a girl are the basis of her life’s work. She has turned her insecurity into empathy, her experience of abuse into healing, and her exposure to intolerance into love and compassion. ❖