

When **Ivonne Díaz-Claisse** was inducted into the New Jersey Women's Hall of Fame this year, she was praised for supporting Latino youth by providing them with mentors and role models in their pursuit of higher education. She was selected for this honor in recognition of her work as founder, president and CEO of HISPA, Hispanics Inspiring Students' Performance and Achievement, a nonprofit organization that encourages student success by recruiting and coordinating Latino professionals' participation in educational programs in the communities where they live and work.

Díaz-Claisse realized the power role models could have when she was working as an operations research analyst at AT&T and was asked to speak at a career day event at a school in Newark.

"I saw first-hand the power of sharing my own story with Latino students," she said. "I call it one of my 'ah-hah!' moments."

The school visit was part of her outreach work as a participant in the Hispanic Employee Resource Group (ERG) at AT&T. She eventually became national president of the group, and had another 'ah-hah!' moment when she was on a panel at an ERG "best practices" conference held at Microsoft.

"I looked at the audience and panel members and I realized that we represented thousands of

Hispanic professionals who could share our stories to inspire Latino youth to work hard, stay in school and pursue their educational and career dreams."

It was an idea that led to the formation of HISPA. Now in its seventh year, HISPA has recruited close

to 1,000 volunteers from companies such as AT&T, Accenture and Bristol-Myers Squibb, conducted 300 HISPA Role Model Program sessions and hosted 10 Youth Conferences. The Role Model Program is an "on-demand" program that pairs Hispanic/Latino role model volunteers with schools and other community-based educational programs. Its goal is to have professionals share information on their cultural backgrounds, educational experiences and careers. The volunteer becomes a role model to whom the students can relate, thus allowing them to envision the possibilities of determining and achieving their own dreams.

"Nothing can replace the power of a personal story and teaching lessons by example," said Díaz-Claisse. "It is so rewarding to witness the extraordinary ripple effect as role models tell their friends and colleagues about their positive experience relating their stories to students and then more and more people sign up to volunteer."

Although it originated in New Jersey, HISPA has extended its programs to San Antonio, Texas, and New York City. The purpose of the program is to

HISPA Helps Students Find Pathways to College

By Marilyn Gilroy



Dr. Ivonne Díaz-Claisse,
founder and president of HISPA



Dr. Ivonne Díaz-Claisse talks with several middle school students during a HISPA event.

help young Latinos set goals and inspire them to achieve their dreams. HISPA starts its programs in middle schools because research shows early intervention is the most effective way to reduce dropout rates which continue to be high among Latino youths.

“Since research has shown that the middle-school years significantly affect whether children pursue higher education, it is vital for us to reach students during these highly impressionable years,” said Díaz-Claisse.

Needless to say, Díaz-Claisse continues to be an active HISPA role model herself, leading by example, having shared her educational and career experiences with over 5,000 students nationwide. She regularly gives presentations at corporations such as Johnson & Johnson, Ogilvy, Novartis, Merck, UPS, Verizon and Viacom. She carries the HISPA message to college campuses and has spoken at the New Jersey Institute of Technology, Rutgers and Princeton Universities, as well as many national conferences including the College Board’s “Prepárate: Educating Latinos for the Future of America,” and the U.S. Hispanic Leadership Institute.

Her resume includes some impressive academic credentials. She holds a BS in mathematics from the University of Puerto Rico; a master’s in engineering

in operations research from Cornell University, a master’s in mathematics from the University of Maryland and a PhD in mathematics from Arizona State.

Because of her studies and professional experience, Díaz-Claisse is particularly passionate about growing the pipeline of Hispanic students going into STEM fields. She is fluent in English and Spanish and has honed her skills as a lecturer and motivational speaker. It is easy for her to talk about her love of mathematics and science but she also knows what it is like to face challenges and obstacles in pursuing a dream.

“Even as a girl growing up in Puerto Rico, I always loved mathematics, especially the beauty of the Fibonacci sequence and how it could be found in nature and art,” she said. “However, it is true that I had obstacles early on in the form of lack of role models to inspire me in this field and little support from teachers for my academic advancement.”

One teacher told Díaz-Claisse that she probably would not be as academically strong as her brother had been in his class. Later on, a professor said he would not recommend that she pursue a PhD even though he indicated she was in the top 5 percent of talented math students he had taught during the last 30 years.

“But thanks to my mother who taught me ‘soñar no cuesta nada’ – feel free to dream, it is free of charge – I was able to pursue my dream of becoming a mathematician,” said Díaz-Claisse. “Happily, once I entered the telecommunications industry and pursued my graduate degrees, I enjoyed valuable support and mentorship as a professional woman in the STEM fields.”

Although she admits being nervous when she stepped away from her 10-year career and started a nonprofit, she has no regrets and is absolutely passionate about HISPA’s mission. As HISPA became more established, her role expanded and since 2005, Díaz-Claisse has also been a consultant to various public and private entities. She works with the nonprofit Educational Testing Service (ETS), advising the company on programs that seek to increase educational opportunities for Hispanics, particularly in higher education, and helping to foster collaborative initiatives with selected organizations. ETS, in turn, has provided support for HISPA that includes gathering data about the impact and efficacy of the program. Students who participated in HISPA role model sessions were asked about their attitudes toward college and their impression of the sessions.

Survey results showed that after participating in the HISPA Role Model Program:

- 96 percent of students thought more seriously about attending college
- 76 percent of students were more interested in attending college
- 74 percent of students were more likely to believe they could attend college
- 82 percent of students thought that attending college would be fun

Students consistently rated the role model sessions as interesting and inspiring regardless of whether or not the career or job being discussed was something they would like to do. Additionally, the survey showed that students seemed to engage the most with role models who focused on their personal stories and seemed enthusiastic about college. The study also noted students were just as likely to in-

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Ivonne Díaz-Claisse, president, and CEO of HISPA

dicating that the cost of college and poor grades might keep them from attaining a higher education degree. Díaz-Claisse was pleased with the survey results but also said that the data might lead to some tweaking of the program.

“When students say that attending college would be fun, it is a noteworthy attitudinal shift because they are indicating that college could be something they ‘want’ to do, not just ‘should’ do,” she said. “We also were delighted to find that students consistently rated the role model sessions as interesting and inspiring.”

However, because students expressed concerns about grades and cost as barriers to college, role models are being encouraged to discuss how they might have personally overcome financial barriers and highlight that there are various alternative paths to college and career.

Despite a demanding schedule of events and activities, Díaz-Claisse continues to embrace the joys and challenges of creating and building HISPA. For her, it is a labor of love.

“My HISPA journey has been so rewarding and empowering. I would never have predicted that sharing the story of my own educational and professional journey would be a source of inspiration to so many students. I call it my unpredictable mathematical journey.” ☺

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