



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: CORALI LÓPEZ-CASTRO, AIDA T. LEVITAN, BARBIE GARCÍA, ELIZABETH BENGOCHEA, DARLING J. LIE-NIELSEN, HELEN AGUIRRE.

# Family, education help Latinas succeed

In partnership with Northwestern Mutual, the Latina Vanguard Series came to Miami



CEJA BOTTLES FROM CEJA VINEYARDS. ABSOLUTELY STUNNING.

**M**IAMI (Latino Leaders Magazine)— The dining room at the Four Seasons Hotel overlooking Biscayne Bay was elegant and the mood was friendly as a small group of Latina professionals gathered in Miami on March 26th to share a gourmet meal and compare notes on their experiences in the world of Miami business.

Although the women represented two generations and many Latin countries, including Mexico, Nicaragua and Cuba, they found they share many of



the same values—namely that what matters most in life, and what contributes most to a successful career, are close family connections and a good education.

They came together for the Miami Latiná Vanguard Series. The series has been held in several cities across the country, sponsored by Northwestern Mutual.

“There is a strong entrepreneurial spirit and tremendous networking (in Miami), because Hispanics are the majority here and they know each other from their countries,” said Helen Aguirre Ferre, a prominent Miami bi-lingual print and TV journalist, herself from a family of Nicaraguan exiles.

## The value of Bilingualism

Bilingualism is valued in Miami. “In fact, (many Americans living in Miami) are intimidated by us because they aren’t bilingual,” said Elizabeth Bengochea, owner of Overseas Freight Solutions, an import-export firm in Miami.

“You can spend the entire day in Miami and only hear Spanish. In that sense, we are different,” from other cities in the US, said Corali Lopez-Castro, a bankruptcy attorney.

As a successful professional, López-Castro has received requests to become a mentor. Recently, she said that she received such a request from a young, female attorney. She complied she said, because “we have an obligation to mentor other women.” At the same time, she reported that her own best mentors have been men.

“Everyone (who is successful) had a mentor,” said Aguirre Ferre. “No one did it alone.”

In addition to having a good mentor, López-Castro said that for a professional woman to be successful, she needs a supportive partner. She described



ABOVE: FROM LEFT: HELEN AGUIRRE FERRE, ELIZABETH BENGOCHEA AND DARLING J. LIE-NIELSEN, LEFT: CORALI LÓPEZ-CASTRO

herself as fortunate in having a husband/partner who is also a lawyer and understands the work issues that she encounters every day as well as the need to devote a lot of time to work. “When a client needs a problem resolved, if I were tied to someone else’s schedule,” that would not work, she said.

Darling J. Lie-Nielsen, a financial representative at Northwestern Mutual Financial Network, who advises clients on insurance and investment plans, also believes in the importance of having a supportive spouse. “My husband John loves me for many things, including the fact that I have a career,” she says. “He understands some of the struggles I have during the day,” an understanding “that brings with it a tighter bond,” she said.

Each woman at the table had her own unique experience with being a working mother. Aida Levitán, now retired, who, with her former husband owned an advertising agency and currently does philanthropic work, told the group that her ex-







ON THE LEFT, ALEXANDRA VILLOCH, AIDA LEVITÁN AND CORALI LÓPEZ-CASTRO. BELOW: ALEXANDRA VILLOCH, PRESIDENT AND PUBLISHER OF MIAMI HERALD MEDIA COMPANY. BELOW, LEFT, HELEN AGUIRRE FERRE, AN AWARD-WINNING JOURNALIST LISTENS ON.



“Everyone (who is successful) had a mentor. No one did it alone.” -Helen Aguirre Ferre, a prominent Miami bilingual print and TV journalist, herself from a family of Nicaraguan exiles.



husband had been her business partner for 20 years, even though they were only married for 17 years.

Because she and her then-husband both needed outside support to carry out domestic responsibilities while they worked long hours, they hired a Peruvian woman, who had sought political asylum in the US, to be an all-around helper. “She (had been) a middle class woman with four children living in Peru and was excellent at organization,” said Levitán. “She gave me tremendous support,” she said. Although Levitán’s mother was also supportive, she noted that the Peruvian housekeeper also acted as a baby sitter, chauffeur and sometimes cook.

## Family power

A number of the women at the gathering had parents who had been forced to leave their countries for political reasons. As political exiles, “We had no

idea how long we would be here (in the US),” said Aguirre Ferre, “so women had to find work as seamstresses.”

As the children of immigrants whose parents were well-educated, the women at the luncheon all reported a strong need to succeed fostered by their parents. “We had to be the best of the best,” said Ferre.

Hispanic families encourage their daughters to go to college, not just their sons, the Latinas at the gathering agreed. But they often do not encourage their daughters to leave home. Quite the contrary.

Alexandra Villoch, president and publisher at the *Miami Herald* related her story about going to college: “I had been accepted at Georgetown University at 16,” said Villoch. “But when it came time to actually pack up and go, my mother and aunt sat me down in our living room and cried,” she said. “‘We cook your dinner, we wash your clothes, why do you need to leave?’ they asked me,” said Villoch. “And so I stayed and enrolled in Miami-Dade College two weeks before school started and never went away to college.”

“Fast forward 29 years later when my daughter got accepted to Princeton, it was the same story,” said Villoch. “My aunt and mother came into my living room and asked the same questions. ‘(New Jersey) is far away and very cold. Why does she need to go there?’ they asked me. ‘After all, you stayed home and you have done very well,’” said the Miami Herald publisher. This time Villoch’s answer was a swift. “There’s no discussion here—she is going away.”