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Hispanic[®]

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Photo: Official Navy Photo

THE RECRUITER

Eva Marte of the US Navy

Eva Marte was never supposed to have a career, let alone one that landed her as a top recruiter with one of the country's most prestigious military branches. Growing up just outside of Mexico City, her fate was all but sealed. "I come from a little town where you're expected to get married and have children—and that's that," she says. "You don't have a career; you stay home and take care of your kids." However, Marte didn't leave anything to fortune—she knew much more awaited her. At age 17, she, her brother, and her four sisters moved to the United States to be with their parents, who were seasonal migrant workers.

"Maybe it's the culture, but in my experience, I see a lot of Hispanic females in the military who think, 'I can only go this far,' and then they don't push themselves. I've worked with other Hispanic females and I say, 'No, no, no—we can't stop here. Why stop here when you can go so much further?'"

Needless to say, coming to America didn't mean instant success. Marte understood that as an immigrant, a minority, and a female, she'd have to work hard to move up, making use of every opportunity available. "I wanted to break that mold of 'Hey, I'm supposed to just get married and have kids,'" she says. "I had bigger dreams, bigger goals for myself."

Those goals led Marte to study and teach herself English, as well as enlist in the US Navy, for which she has been stationed all over—from Florida to Portugal to the Richmond, Virginia, area, where she currently resides. However, she knew that her English wasn't good enough when she first enlisted, and so she made it a goal to perfect the language.

"I [said to myself], 'I have to learn, I have to do better, I have to take the test, and I have to be able to read and write English so that I can join the Navy,'" she recalls.

That strong will has indeed benefited Marte. In 2009, she was awarded the US Navy's Enlisted Recruiter of the Year—Reserve award, and was honored in the nation's capital—no small feat, Marte explains. "Maybe it's the culture, but in my experience, I see a lot of Hispanic females in the military who think, 'I can only go this far,' and then they don't push themselves," she says. "I've worked with other Hispanic females and I say, 'No, no, no—we can't stop here. Why stop here when you can go so much further?'"

If anyone knows about going beyond what's expected, it's Marte. To her, leadership means more than earning a prestigious award; it means giving back to the community. Since 2007, Marte has taught English to numerous minorities in the Virginia Beach/Norfolk area. On a volunteer basis, she uses a classroom in a local church to instruct students in ESL, translating documents and helping with language-barrier issues that her pupils have encountered at work or school. She has also helped students' parents who don't speak English, assisting them in such events as parent/teacher conferences.

After spreading knowledge in her community and becoming one of the top recruiters in the US Navy, Marte has nowhere to look but forward. "I grew up thinking that the opportunities are not there for me because I'm Hispanic and I'm a female," she says. "But now I'm more aware and more involved as to what's out there—not just in the military, not just in the Navy, but the opportunities that are there. It's what we do when the opportunities present themselves that's going to make a difference."

— MICHAEL DANAHER



ACCOMPLISHMENTS

US Navy's Enlisted Recruiter of the Year—Reserve Award



IN GOOD HEALTH



THE NETWORKER by Allena Tapia

Industry organizations match Hispanic talent with an ever-evolving medical field

The American healthcare system is in a constant state of flux. The passing of the healthcare reform bill signaled a victory for some; at the same time, however, a tough road lies ahead as divided Americans really examine healthcare. George Zeppenfeldt-Cestero is not new to this kind of change, nor the world of healthcare.

Zeppenfeldt-Cestero serves on not one, but two national organizations that focus on the industry as it relates to Hispanic and Latino populations: the Association of Hispanic Healthcare Executives (AHHE) and the National Hispanic Chamber of Commerce on Health (NHCCH). In fact, he founded both organizations and is currently the national president of the AHHE and the CEO and president of the NHCCH. The AHHE signed on with over 200 other organizations in support of healthcare reform, and Zeppenfeldt-Cestero works tirelessly to make sure that the resulting system reflects the Hispanics who use it.

Reflection

In 2000, the UCLA Center for the Study of Latino Health and Culture cited a study that indicated that for every Latino physician practicing in California, there were over 3,000 Latino patients. While not every

Hispanic specifically wishes to see only a doctor of the same ethnicity, the numbers indicate a serious disconnect. The AHHE, however, goes beyond that to the higher ranks of the healthcare industry, which show equal disparity.

"The AHHE was founded to address the issues of Latinos employed in the healthcare sector, whether it is hospitals, managed care, pharmaceutical, and any other management capacity. We want to increase the numbers of Latinos in senior policymaking positions within those industries," Zeppenfeldt-Cestero explains.

Zeppenfeldt-Cestero describes three ways that the AHHE addresses this concern: "The Association wants to cultivate the educational pipeline, ensuring that Latinos progress toward those areas. We want to increase [Hispanic] numbers in those positions. We also want to increase the number of Hispanics on hospital boards of trustees."


In regards to the dollar, a 2003 Reuters report indicated that healthcare spending amounted to 14.1 percent of the United States' GDP. Are Latino suppliers and businesses able to compete for a share of this vast amount? Zeppenfeldt-Cestero says that this was an

area that had not been addressed nationally; thus, the NHCCH was born.

"Since [the AHHE] already had a relationship with the hospital industry, both at the local level via the Greater New York Hospital Association and at the national level with the American Hospital Association, we saw this as an opportunity to start a discussion with those organizations to address supplier diversity within the hospital scales," he says. "We are actively developing that opportunity. We've also started to provide some resources for Hispanic business owners to look at health-insurance options for their employees."

Barriers and Solutions

With such admirable goals, Zeppenfeldt-Cestero is working overtime to implement several programs and initiatives. "Our key goal for our annual gala in June is mentoring the next generation of healthcare leaders," he says. "We are developing a more inclusive mentoring program, including one that can be done online. Some programs are only located in certain areas, but the Hispanic pipeline is nationwide. We're trying to integrate online mentoring technology so that individuals in all parts of the country can join [and] chat with senior Hispanic healthcare leaders."



The healthcare industry's pulse beats with Hispanics in every rank. It's no surprise that this booming population has a presence in one of today's most talked-about fields—even though the Pew Hispanic Center reports that more than one-fourth of Hispanic adults in the United States lack a usual healthcare provider. Still, healthcare serves as a platform for many Hispanics to create a lucrative career, help their communities, and maybe even change the statistics of the population.

From **professional healthcare organizations** to **celebrity dentists** to the **tech-savvy IT guy** that keeps your health records secure, the Hispanics in this section represent the industry's top tier.

“Some programs are only located in certain areas, but the Hispanic pipeline is nationwide. We’re trying to integrate online mentoring technology so that individuals in all parts of the country can join [and] chat with senior Hispanic healthcare leaders.”

—George Zeppenfeldt-Cestero, National President

Along those same lines, Zeppenfeldt-Cestero describes the need for nationwide networking for those already in the industry. As it’s sometimes difficult to develop chapters for either organization in certain parts of the United States, he emphasizes the need to start with virtual chapters that can connect even a small number of professionals in one geographic area.

“Another barrier that the [general public] may not know is that hospital boards of trustees or boards of directors serve without payment for their time,” he notes. “That’s unlike the corporate sector, where you get a position as a director at Colgate/Palmolive or FedEx, or any Fortune 500 company, and it’s paid. But hospitals—nonprofits—don’t pay the boards.” Because of this pay disparity, it is a challenge to encourage Hispanics to serve on hospital boards. In addition, Zeppenfeldt-Cestero says that hospitals were driven by the monetary worth of their board members until recently. As he explains, “Part of serving on a board is developing relationships, and we have to look for what we can bring, such as diversity, to a board of governors.”

Zeppenfeldt-Cestero is most animated about past successes, such as the recent National Hispanic Health Professional Leadership Legislative Summit. Started approximately eight years ago, the Summit was attended and coordinated by Congresswoman Nydia Velazquez and attended by then-Congresswoman Hilda Solis, along with presidents of the major Hispanic health and medical

organizations. “We brought together a roundtable of the giants in the health profession, and we’re trying to implement similar events in the form of town-hall meetings throughout the country,” Zeppenfeldt-Cestero says.

Joining the Ranks

With over 20 years of experience in the industry, Zeppenfeldt-Cestero has plenty of advice and direction for potential healthcare professionals. “When you’re first getting into an industry, I think it’s important to look at the career path, where the Latinos are in those industries,” he says. “I think you also have to look at organizations that have programs that address the issue of diversity.”

Zeppenfeldt-Cestero cites New York Presbyterian Hospital Center in New York City as an example of forward-thinking healthcare. The Center has a system in place called the Lang Youth Program: a six-year, all-year-round teaching-internship program for Washington Heights middle-school students with good, consistent academic performance and an interest in the health professions. Students are given an opportunity to interact within the hospital, rotating through various departments throughout the course of the year. “That tells me that it’s an institution that cares about diversity within the structure and is looking to develop a new generation,” he says.

Zeppenfeldt-Cestero also focuses on the upper-management in healthcare: “You want to look at management: Are there Latinos in management positions? What does the board



of trustees look like?,” he says. “This not only applies to administration, but to any senior position in the organization.”

Despite the flux of the healthcare system, one thing is for certain: if Zeppenfeldt-Cestero, his colleagues, and affiliated organizations continue to implement programs and advocate for Latinos in the field, what the industry looks like on the other side of reform will more-closely mirror the constituents and populations it serves. *H/E*

JANITOR

CEO



ENTREPRENEUR OF THE YEAR

BY ALLENA TAPIA

HOW ALEX FORTUNATI CREATED A FACILITIES-MAINTENANCE POWERHOUSE FROM THE GROUND UP

Alex Fortunati's undertaking three decades ago created one of America's leading facilities-maintenance companies, Support Services of America (SSA). The unfailing passion of its founder and CEO coupled with his knowledge of facility care, which he earned through years of janitorial work, has led the company to unmatched growth. This combination also earned SSA a designation as the number one Hispanic-owned firm in North America. SSA has the largest national network of facilities-maintenance client accounts, and business covers 25 million square feet, almost 1,000 employees, and 3,000 subcontractors.



Alex Fortunati's willingness to get his hands dirty landed him with \$1 million in revenues in just three years after starting SSA.
Photo: Paul Cruz

“After so many years of having ups and downs in life, this company has provided me with so much learning experience and so many life stories and events. It has provided me a tremendous satisfaction to see people who have also grown and have progressed in their life beside me.”

“I have always believed that we have been extremely fortunate. As you can see, I carry it in my last name,” Fortunati says. However, he does not discount the work and perseverance that created his success, and recognizes the dedication it took to get his first facility-maintenance contract while working as a janitor at a medical facility. “The property manager of a medical-office building was unhappy with its provider. I approached that person, but [had to tell him] that although I had a tremendous amount of expertise in the industry, I didn’t have a formal proposal, or even a company and insurance,” Fortunati recalls. However, he prepared a proposal, registered as a DBA, and contacted an insurance agent. “I impressed the manager, having done all that in 24 hours, and so Support Services of America was born.”

As other medical centers caught wind of Fortunati’s quality of service, SSA quickly grew. “My wife and I physically did the cleaning at night, and I still had the day job working for another company. I worked both jobs for a while,” Fortunati explains. Within a year, SSA had grown by five or six customers, and Fortunati left his day job. By the end of the first year, SSA had approximately \$150,000 in sales. By its third year, the company passed \$1 million.

From there, Fortunati built a nationwide team of janitors, handymen, security personnel, and environmental specialists with extensive experience in retail stores, healthcare facilities, federal buildings, military installations, education centers, and more—not to mention, a base of more than 2,500 sites under contract.

THE FORTUNATI WAY

“Fortunati has turned facility maintenance on its ear. It’s a complex model where the feel is local but the footprint is national,” says Fortunati’s advisor, David Cruz.

“Because he started as a janitor, he understands every niche of this industry and has been able to grow exponentially.”

That’s not to say that there is only one factor that contributes to SSA’s success. Facilities are provided with services according to their specific needs and are served regardless of size and capacity. Fortunati is also able to advertise a 12-hour response time, which is possible nationwide because of his unique system of service. “Our company is a hybrid of two systems—of our own staff, our own employees, and of a subcontractor network across the nation,” Fortunati explains. “These two systems are able to provide a high-caliber response system. Depending on the type of service, we even have the ability to provide service within four hours.”

In addition, customer concerns are addressed in 30 minutes or less, with true customer-service value espoused in the “Striving for Excellence” system: a proprietary customer-satisfaction grading system that continuously compares SSA performance to what clients expect.

This performance and focus on the customer has not been lost on Fortunati’s colleagues. He’s been honored with many awards and distinctions, such as the prestigious National Leadership Award, and has been named one of America’s 500 Fastest Growing Businesses by *Inc.* magazine.

VALUES-BASED LIVING

It’s not only Fortunati’s career and entrepreneurial skills that have garnered attention. Earlier this year, he accepted an award from the Hispanic Outreach Taskforce—a community-based organization that provides scholarships to Hispanic students. SSA is a repeat donor to the fund. Further community activities include board membership and involvement with the Latin Business Association, the Hispanic

CLEAN GREEN

Support Services of America aims to provide and use environmentally responsible products in the buildings it serves, but how does it decide what's truly green when labels are largely unregulated?

"We have professionals that attend industry trade shows and conduct testing. Since we serve a variety of industries, one green product for the healthcare industry might not fulfill the purpose in other settings and vice versa. In the last year we've made a tremendous effort in adopting green practices," Fortunati explains. "One of our advisory board members, Dr. Marino, is a scientist and has obtained his LEED accreditation—it's like a seal of approval indicating his expertise. We are progressively growing into understanding 'green.'"



Fortunati and his employees regularly meet to discuss innovations in their industry, how to remain environmentally friendly, and how to pursue a higher level of customer service and satisfaction.

Photo: Paul Cruz



COMMUNITY ROLE MODEL

Fortunati's reach is wide. He met Ruben Guerra, a local small-business owner and current chairman of the Latin Business Association, California's largest membership organization of Hispanic entrepreneurs, at a Latin Business Association Business Certificate program. "[Fortunati] has provided me with the knowledge to keep my business growing. He has a vast amount of knowledge when it comes to marketing and strategizing for the growth of your business," Guerra says. "Watching him grow his business has encouraged me to create a new company and to do business not just in the United States, but internationally."

100, Rotary International, the YMCA, and alumni work. Fortunati even earned an MBA from Pepperdine University for the specific purpose of gaining knowledge and ensuring and increasing the tools necessary to expand and grow the business on a nationwide basis. His most recent foray is with the American Heart Association.

Fortunati also mentors the next generation of Hispanic professionals, including his daughter, Veronica Fortunati-Balibrera, who currently serves as vice president of administration and customer service for SSA. "Veronica is 29 years old and has worked for the company for seven years. She started as a customer-service representative, and worked her way up to vice president," Fortunati explains. "She has been mentored, trained, and coached, and she is a very capable, educated [employee] who can handle the pressures of the position."

Fortunati-Balibrera describes the history of her family as a tale of perseverance—one that informs her father's business strategies. Fortunati is of Italian-Argentine descent, and spent much of his life traveling between the two countries before settling in the United States. Fortunati's Old World connections reveal not only hardship, but also perseverance, as his father hid underground for two years to avoid capture and recruitment by German invaders in Italy during World War II. "I believe those experiences

Congratulations to my good friend and colleague,
Alex Fortunati, on being honored as *Hispanic Executive*
magazine's Entrepreneur of the Year.

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of suffering and survival have an effect on the nature of future generations, hence [my father's] perseverance throughout his own life, which has allowed him to become who he is today," Fortunati-Balibrera explains. "He arrived in the US as a young immigrant determined to own and operate his own business."

Fortunati's perseverance has obviously paid off, and he credits SSA with providing him a lifetime of accomplishment and fulfillment. "Today, at age 51, after so many years of having ups and downs in life, this company has provided me with so much learning experience and so many life stories and events," he says. "It has provided me tremendous satisfaction to see that the people have also grown and have progressed in their lives beside me. That gives me such a great reward as a businessperson." H/E

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