



IN LIKE MANNER...THE WOMEN

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Stepping into a Legacy of Activism

For the third installment of my “God’s Gutsy Gals” series, I’ll tell the story of Susana Rivera-Leon, a remarkable young woman who is carrying out the dream of her father and in the process contributing to the Rivera legacy in the Bronx and in New York City as a whole.

Caring for two small children who were both born prematurely and have had their share of medical issues; trying to be a supportive wife, women’s leader, and church deacon—all while trying to fund and run the 17-year-old agency known as the Latino Pastoral Action Center—Susana is exhausted on most days. Exhaustion would be understandable for many young mothers, but Rivera-Leon is the daughter of community activist, preacher, and faith-based nonprofit advocate Raymond Rivera and thus holds herself to higher standards—not just her father’s, but God’s.

Rivera-Leon herself will tell you that this is not the road she had imagined taking. “I was a preacher’s kid and had an aversion to Christians, because growing up I saw the contrast between what they said and what they did. The last thing I wanted to be was in ministry, but God laughed at my plans.”

Millions of American breadwinners work hard to support their families. But despite their determination and effort, many are mired in low-wage jobs that provide inadequate benefits and offer little opportunity for advancement and economic security. Compounding the problem are public policies that do not adequately prepare workers to advance to higher-skilled, higher-paying jobs or promote the creation of quality jobs. The future for these working families is laden with

challenges, and this is exactly what led Rev. Raymond Rivera to start the Latino Pastoral Action Center (LPAC) in 1992. His ministry was a combination of evangelizing, altar calls, and raising issues of social justice, and his dream was to establish a national faith-based organization that aims to educate, equip, and empower Latino and other urban churches to develop holistic ministries.

In 2000 his daughter joined him at LPAC and clearly stepped into the legacy of activism her father began when he was only 19 years old. When Rivera-Leon came to LPAC, the organization was transitioning from being primarily a provider of technical services to other ministries to becoming a community face in the heart of the Highbridge section of the Bronx, one of the poorest areas of the country. Rivera-Leon had spent her post-college years working for community-based agencies with a focus on after-school programs, and it was these community skills that her father called upon when he brought her into the ministry.

Rivera-Leon is now a leader in the church started in the LPAC building to meet the needs of the community residents that utilize their programs, and she is the one who carries most of the burden to keep LPAC operational and moving forward in an age of reduced corporate and foundation donations. Running a 56,000-square-foot building “could be a blessing and a curse” said a report given to the organization in 1998 by an outside evaluation agency. Both father and daughter admit that while they have had their challenges and many financial rollercoaster rides, there has been nothing but blessing for those who have benefited from the array of programs available at LPAC.

One of the most notable programs of LPAC is the Family Life Academy Charter School, which was told at start-up that it would not survive accreditation

but is now one of the top-performing charter schools for ESL learners in the state of New York. Other programs include the National Holistic Ministry Development Project, which assists faith- and community-based organizations in building holistic ministries that help children, youth, and adults to become strong, independent, articulate leaders who legitimately represent and are accountable to their communities in New York City and Chicago. Since LPAC started, it has helped hundreds of organizations understand faith-based community ministry focused on at-risk youth, early childhood development, literacy, fatherhood, healthy marriages, homelessness, drug rehabilitation, gang and violence prevention, and college and career development.

At the time Rivera-Leon joined LPAC, she thought it would only be for a year or two. She’s been there eight years now, with no proposed exit date in sight, and she can’t see herself doing anything else with her life. Her father has named her executive vice president, and she runs the day-to-day operations while he travels and speaks around the country.

As much as she has come to enjoy all she does, Rivera-Leon looks forward to life being a little bit calmer—one day. Clearly unburdened by her legacy, she continues to weave the various aspects of her life in hopes that she can be used to bring peace and justice to a community riddled with economic woes—all while being a wife, mother, and daughter. She intends to carry on her father’s legacy until, as she says, “God releases me.” ■

Learn more at LPACministries.com.

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