

National summit encourages Latina entrepreneurship

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Timi Aguilar faced a decision in 2004, after more than 10 years of corporate public relations work.

Should she move from Denver to Texas, following her job at AT&T, where she was the company's Western region public relations director? (AT&T merged with [SBC Communications Inc.](#), and her job would be transferred to Dallas.)

Or stay in Denver, where she and her husband wanted to raise their family, and follow her dream of striking out on her own?

"I was scared," Aguilar said. "I thought, maybe this is the time to take that chance. I thought, even if I fail after a year, there's times in your life where you're going to take a chance. There's times when you're going to take a risk."

So she left AT&T. She turned down other job offers. And in January 2005, she started Aguilar Public Relations LLC.

"I didn't have a single contract, but I just did it," Aguilar said.

One month later, Aguilar Public Relations picked up its first contract through a referral, to work on branding strategy for McDonald's USA.

Since then, the company has worked for clients big and small, including AT&T and Denver's Latina Chamber.

Through the chamber, Aguilar is handling, pro bono, local public relations for the Sept. 16-19 convention of the U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, as well as the special Latina Summit portion of the event. The latter will focus on encouraging Hispanic women in business and as business owners.

Aguilar will be there to network with others who, like her, are seeking opportunities and relationships to help them grow in business.

“As a Latina, I’m finding that there aren’t a lot of Latinas in my specific field of public relations,” Aguilar said. “There’s a lot of women, but not many who are Latina who can bring the experiences and relationships in the Latino community.

“It’s unfortunate, because we’re such a growing community. It’s my hope that there will be more.”

That’s a hope shared by the co-chairs of the Latina Summit — Denver’s Linda Alvarado, president and CEO of Denver-based [Alvarado Construction Inc.](#), and Elizabeth Gallagher, vice chair of the U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce and head of the Gallagher Group public relations and marketing firm as well as Savi Construction in Las Vegas.

“The Latina Summit is to acknowledge not just the success stories but to talk about how we are now becoming an even larger component in the economic presence and future of America,” said Alvarado, who expects both women and men will attend the summit’s panels and events.

“It’s beyond just, ‘As a Latina, how do I get a job?’” Alvarado said. “It’s the career path, not just achieving a management position, but looking at myself as being an owner of my own company. It’s about choices, and to ensure that we have opportunities to meet and to understand tracks.”

Latinas are a growing segment of the U.S. business community, according to the Latina Summit.

- Latinas are majority owners of nearly 10 percent of all women-owned firms in the United States.
- The number of Latina-owned businesses increased by 121 percent between 1997 and 2006.

Among those locally are Marjorie Silva, owner of Azucar Sweet Shop & Bakery in Englewood, a Peruvian immigrant who opened her shop at Hampden Avenue and Broadway three years ago. It sells cakes, Peruvian desserts and handmade candy.

“It’s doing pretty good,” said Silva, who figures the store is making sales of \$8,000 to \$10,000 a month during the summer wedding cake season. “This year, we’re doing six to eight wedding cakes a weekend, and a lot of birthday cakes, sheet cakes and baby showers, christening cakes.”

Silva credits the shop’s existence and success to the classes she took and the business plan she wrote with the help of Mi Casa Resource Center in Denver, which focuses on economic development in the Latino community.

“There’s a lot of help for Latinas out there, you just have to know how to find it,” Silva said. “If you don’t have a good business plan, no one will help you. But as a woman and minority, that helped me.”

But there are obstacles for Latinas in business — not only gender issues, but also cultural ones.

Lourdes Rios, owner of Lourdes Rios Designs in Denver, remembers spending hours as a child watching her cousin sew beautiful gowns that fit perfectly. As an 18-year-old, she spent a year at the Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising in Los Angeles, a private college specializing in fashion, graphics, interior design and the entertainment industry.

But her father, a migrant worker, wanted her at home. He didn't want his daughter away from home in a Los Angeles college and learning about fashion, Rios said.

"I was 18," she said. "My choice was school or my relationships with my father and my family, so I came home."

She worked in retail, working her way up to store manager. But she dreamed of being a designer.

When her oldest daughter, now 13, was born, Rios made the infant's christening gown. Others asked her to sew special clothes for them.

With the encouragement of her husband, Rios kept sketching, sewing and showing pieces at local fashion shows.

Rios tested interest in her work last winter by sending a few pieces to high-end boutiques in Larimer Square and Cherry Creek. The Larimer Square store, Eve Inc., sold out of her velvet jackets in a week, Rios said.

And from Aug. 31-Sept. 2, Rios showed 25 of her pieces at the invite-only Moda Las Vegas, a fashion show for 5,000 buyers from high-end boutiques across the country and internationally.

Rios said her pieces are at a "midpoint" price point, wholesaling for \$120 to \$350 and carrying a retail price of two or three times those numbers.

"Don't give up on your dreams," Rios said she'd tell anyone thinking about a business. "I know it's hard with family. It's a very difficult thing, but if you keep your passion for what you believe in, don't give up.

"And take business classes. Be more business oriented. In order to be successful in this type of business, you have to have a business plan," she said — adding that business classes are on her list of things to do.

And Rios' father? He came to one of Rios' fashion shows during the summer. With tears in his eyes, he gave his daughter \$7,000 to invest in her company.

"I remember him crying and saying, 'I'm so sorry, you have a great talent, and once you get your business going ...'" Rios said. "He's my No. 1 fan."