Lifting Up Latina Teens with L.O.V.E.

By: Catherine Wald | May 9, 2018

Take a handful of startling statistics, add a dynamic Colombian immigrant with a vision of helping young women fulfill their dreams, and you’ve got Latinas on the Verge of Excellence, a.k.a. L.O.V.E. mentoring program. Founded in fall, 2012 by Claudia Espinosa, this NYWF-funded organization partners with New York City schools to address the specific challenges that high school girls face as Latinas.

A native of Colombia, Claudia moved to New York City in her early twenties with a limited knowledge of English. After two years of ESL classes, she learned firsthand how hard it is to get a green card – and what that means. “I had to wait seven years. During that time, I felt like I was in prison – I couldn’t get student loans, a bank account or credit card.” She also couldn’t leave the United States to visit her parents.

Later, while attending college, Claudia took a job as an

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intake counselor at Life Is Precious, a nonprofit that treats young women from Brooklyn and the Bronx who had just been released from hospitals after trying to take their lives—often after a second attempt. She was shocked to learn that, in New York City, 39 percent of Latinas become pregnant as teenagers, 37 percent drop out of school, and 23 percent attempt suicide.

“I heard about the challenges of each of these girls. They came to the program to vent, but I had no medium for venting myself.” Six months into the program, Claudia decided to someday get more proactive support. “I didn’t know how or where, but I began a degree in nonprofit management.”

Adolescent Latinas face similar obstacles: they may not speak English, are often undocumented and may have been separated from their parents. In families where parents are working two to three jobs to make ends meet, young women are encouraged to become caregivers, wives and mothers rather to than to study, graduate high school or attend college.

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While earning bachelor’s and master’s degrees in forensic psychology from CUNY, Claudia mulled over the problem. She saw how easy it was for young women to be sidetracked and abandon their educations—and she wanted to support them while they were still in school. “If you don’t start with a young population, there’s only so much difference you can make.”

Finally, as a graduate student in public administration from at NYU, she was ready to try out new mentoring model, which would pair Latina high school students with college students from similar backgrounds — active, relatable role models — from freshman year all through high school.

NYU faculty members guided Claudia in recruiting mentors and mentees, developing curricula and forging the alliances that allowed her to start a pilot program. Officially launched in the spring of 2012 at The Young Women’s Leadership School of East Harlem, L.O.V.E. now offers programs to eight public high schools in four boroughs, serving 150 mentees each academic year. Participating schools also include the International Network for Public Schools and Urban Assembly.

Using a series of structured mentoring and group activities, L.O.V.E mentors model how young Latinas can succeed personally and academically. First and foremost, even before academics, is building self-esteem. “They need a space where they can be themselves, express their feelings and emotions and be supported rather than judged.”

Says former mentee Lauren Drumgold, a junior at Bates College in Maine, majoring in biology, “It was great to have a college student teach me about the challenges, “More than the academic side, I learned about the life I’d be living for the next couple of years – how to balance social life and homework, how to live with a roommate.”

Lauren learned effective study habits, and developed the short-term planning skills needed to drive long-term dreams. “My goal was to go to college, but what Claudia helped instill in us was the idea of being as specific as possible and physically write down the steps you will take to reach that goal.”

That’s just the way it’s supposed to work. “My goal was, if the student can see herself in her mentor, if the mentor looks like her, has a similar makeup and cultural background, it makes a big difference,” says Claudia. “They see that she did it, and I can do it, too.”
Imara Jones’ Intersectional News: Good to the Last Drop

By: Catherine Wald | May 28, 2018

Imara Jones doesn’t walk, talk or dress like your typical news anchor. That’s a good thing for a lot of people, especially 74 million millennials. More racially, ethnically and gender diverse than previous generations, their demographic recently surpassed the baby boomers in size – and they want that reflected in the media. You could say they want their information filtered differently, with a richer blend, and more flavors.

That’s why Imara, a veteran journalist and media expert as
well as a transgendered woman of color has created “The Last Sip,” a steady stream of in-depth insights and interviews that include people not featured nearly often enough on mainstream news broadcasts. The weekly, half-hour program hones in on how events shape the needs of women and LGBTQ people of color, with a particular emphasis on millennials. “Many young people are locked out of society in every single way, which has not been true in our culture for a very long time,” she says. “It used to be that by age 30, most people were feeling competent in their lives. Now even 35-year-olds can’t get married, buy cars or houses, or find job security, and this is true across race, gender and class.”

The premise of the show is that answers to our most pressing problems will lie in historically marginalized communities. “So many of these groups are not valued by mainstream news outlets,” says Imara. “The fascinating thing is these groups are the future.”

“The Last Sip’s” first cup was served on Sunday, April 15, beginning an initial eight-run ending on Sunday, June 8. Produced by Oria Media, it airs on the independent, non-profit news network, Free Speech TV (FSTV). The first segment featured a mix of politicos, academics and activists. She asked Obama aide Jesse Moore about the impact of Paul Ryan’s departure (Imara: “He left to spend more time with his family – is he just now noticing them?”); Alexandra Bastien, a senior associate at the national think tank Policy Link, discussed inequities in the tax code in honor of April 15; and in a talk with Damayan Migrant Workers’ Association founder Linda Oalican, she explained how she rescued Filipino women from bondage situations (“the most marginalized of the marginalized”) and formed a domestic workers’ cooperative that allows them to ‘own’ their own labor. Last on the lineup was Imara’s take on the “vagina pants” in Janelle Monae’s latest video release, PYNK.

A frequent guest on TV and radio for MSNBC, CNBC, HuffPost Live, PBS, Al Jazeera and NPR, Imara is obviously at ease with the camera. As a reporter, her commentary has been featured in The Guardian, The Nation, BBC News, Salon and others. Her contributions to media and social justice have won Emmy and Peabody Awards; she’s also held staff positions at the Clinton White House and executive responsibilities at Viacom.

The idea for a new kind of broadcast had been percolating for about a decade, during which the biggest challenge at the outset was getting people to take the idea seriously. An initial grant from New York Women’s Foundation was “a catalytic and symbolic event.” With a track record from that major foundation they were able to generate funds from other foundations. “It helped us get more money, open the doors and put on the show.” Since a lot of the forces that are driving inequities are not local or national but global, the program will include discussion of issues with thought leaders from outside the United States, and highlight inspirational activists from Europe, Latin America, the Middle East and Asia. Despite a long career, Imara finds she still gets revved up every time she interviews guests. “I believe there’s not a person who isn’t interesting, and I go into every interview expecting to discover something.” She recently read that toddlers like learning because their brains are wired to give them a shot of dopamine every time the experience something new. “For me, that high never ended – in my brain, I guess I’m still a toddler.”

As a sideline, she also hopes the show will demonstrate how much transgendered women contribute to the conversations of feminists and oppressed groups. “A huge part of misogyny and patriarchy is biological determinism – and the presence of trans women helps break the link between womanhood and biological determinism.”

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Changing Philanthropy, One Latte at a Time

By: Catherine Wald | July 9, 2018

Grainne McNamara, a partner at Price Waterhouse Coopers (PwC), has more than 20 years of experience implementing technology, business, and regulatory change programs. In this leadership role, she focuses on digital transformation leveraging emerging technology and agile delivery methods. But lately she’s been learning a lot about leadership from an unexpected source: The nonprofit world.

When Grainne began her career, she was under the impression that only the wealthy could be involved in supporting nonprofits. “To me, philanthropy meant very rich people writing enormous checks. Although I wanted to contribute, I wasn’t sure what I had to offer or how to be effective.”

Beyond Check-Writing
Enter The New York Women’s Foundation (NYWF), which has been supporting women’s leadership, gender equity, and asset-based community projects for 31 years. Its mission made sense to her: In New York City, where one in four women live in poverty, the organization finds ways to leverage small donations of time or funds and make a big impact on the economic well-being and safety of vulnerable women and families.

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By investing in fledgling organizations that have on-the-ground knowledge of the needs of their communities, “We serve basically as venture capital to incubate smaller organizations,” Grainne says. “This allows them, as they grow, to graduate to the radar screens of some of the bigger funders, who would have never supported them initially.”

Recent grantees include Hot Bread Kitchen, a national baked goods business based in East Harlem, which provides hands-on training and job readiness to immigrants of color. The NYWF also funds the Center for Family Life, which has...
launched such coops as Beyond Care, a child supervision and educational service, and Si Se Pueden!, a house-cleaning co-op that provides a living wage and social supports to its members.

“We're funding things that help create financial stability and economic security for women, and that’s aligned with many corporate visions,” Grainne says. “If we help young women do well, they might even end up appearing in our pipeline for an interview.”

**Leading Ways to Give**

Grainne found it stimulating to work at the intersection of philanthropy and the corporate world. She enjoys helping nonprofits translate their mission and results into the right language to attract corporate donors.

Her work has also convinced her that the nonprofit world and corporations have a lot to offer each other. While corporations excel at business success, nonprofits have much to offer in the way of bold, visionary leaders who are willing to take risks — but don’t necessarily know how to tabulate return on investment. Bringing her business acumen to NYWF, she teaches grantees to articulate the connection between their vision and mission, and a clear value proposition.

Conversely, she’s gained new insight into the power of creative leadership demonstrated by the nonprofit founders NYWF supports. “Many of these people are visionaries, who model behaviors that corporations are looking for. They also have much to teach us about showing up as your authentic self to the workplace,” Grainne says. “I personally get so much out of it. I’ve learned about leadership in a different way.”

**Toward a New Generation of Philanthropists**

She has also recognized that an important demographic group in the corporate world is equally concerned about authenticity both on and off the job: Millennials, who will represent half of the workforce by the year 2020. Members of this generation care deeply about changing the world.

According to a 2015 survey by The Millennial Impact Project, they are most likely to give when they feel inspired by an organization and when they see examples of the impact their gifts will have.

For an organization like PwC, which hires 8,000 college graduates each year, motivating younger people to engage with their communities, and providing a venue for them to do so, is key. To that end, Grainne spearheaded NYWF’s Radical Generosity®@Work efforts, which was designed to extend corporate giving beyond the charitable funds organizations traditionally donate to larger nonprofits. Instead, it leverages the involvement of groups of individual employees. NYWF makes this initiative available to any organization where employees want to get involved.

Working with NYWF, Grainne created a millennial-focused giving program based on making it convenient to commit to philanthropy at a young age. Hence “Thirty Dollars for Thirty,” which allows employees to commit to contributing a manageable amount — $30 per month — for 30 months. “That’s the cost of two taxi cabs, or five lattes,” Grainne says. What those lattes add up to, however, is a lot more than financial — it’s a feeling of being connected to a community and a corporation that supports your desire to be part of something bigger than yourself. Plus, Grainne says, “People like the idea of giving where they live. They take the subways and see homeless people, and the results of other economic inequities, and they feel the need to do something. This is a really productive way to channel all that.”

To ensure donors feel engaged, NYWF also visits corporate offices to discuss grant-making strategies and share success stories with donors. “Because they focus on local leaders, it’s easy to understand who they are supporting, and to be on the front lines of change,” Grainne adds. “This also fosters connections with colleagues on a more personal level, and that enables better collaboration in the workplace.”
The House that Hope Built: Topeka Sam and LOHM

By: Catherine Wald | July 22, 2018

Topeka K. Sam is one of seventy million. That’s the number of people in this country who have a criminal record or conviction. The founder and executive director of The Ladies of Hope Ministries (LOHM), she spent more than three years in federal prison on drug charges. Yet she considers herself lucky.

“I knew before going in, while I was in, and after, that I had a great privilege. I’m a woman of color who has an education, entrepreneurial experience and a support network of family, friends and professional colleagues. When I came home, I had the ability to rebuild my life quickly.”

Topeka began planning her reentry while still incarcerated. Upon release in 2015, she could have returned to her job as a union chairperson, but found she had a new purpose in life. “I didn’t learn anything from prison, but I learned a lot from the sisters I met there, and I wanted change.”

She landed a part-time job, enrolled in a Christian ministry course and founded LOHM to help disenfranchised and mar-
ginalized women and girls transition back into society. Since then, she’s played an active role in educating the public and advocating for public policy. In early 2016 she held the first of 11 symposiums on “Real Women Real Voices: Where the People Meet the Policy.” She served as a Columbia University Beyond the Bars 2015 Fellow, a Columbia University 2016 Justice-in-Education Scholar, and founding member and national organizer of the National Council for Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls.

Most women don’t have any of Topeka’s advantages when they are released from prison. The correctional system that does little to prepare female inmates for release in terms of technical or financial skills. “The only thing they teach you in vocational training is knitting, crocheting and beading,” Topeka says.

Without family support, financial resources, skills or education, the first and biggest challenge for former inmates is finding a place to live. Often the only options – shelters or halfway houses — are inadequate. Some women are forced to return to abusive relationships just to have a roof over their heads.

Meanwhile, the world can change so much while you’re incarcerated that you need to learn how to navigate a world where even the most basic things – phone calls, Metrocards, the internet – have to be learned from scratch. “When I went into prison, I had an iPhone 3. When I came out, it was iPhone 5,” says Topeka. “But I met women who went to prison even before cell phones existed.” It’s a whole new world, where you don’t know how to make a phone call, use the internet or use a Metrocard.

That’s why, soon after she launched LOHM, Topeka founded Hope House New York City as a safe housing space for women and girls. “It’s a beautiful space in the Castle Hill section of the Bronx to heal from a life of violence and incarceration. Women get housing and food until they can move them into permanent housing. It gives them time to do the work of figuring out, ‘What do I do with my life?’

With a staff of three, a working board of four, and about 20 volunteers, LOHM recently partnered with Instacart, which provides a full year of meals for 3,000 families impacted by the correctional system. Hope House finally opened its doors early in 2018 and, after only two months, one of the first residents began studying cosmetology and plans to open her own hair salon. She’s also on track to getting her kids back from foster care. LOHM aims to create similar safe houses in each of the other four boroughs of New York.

Even more exciting is a new effort to build a specially designed internet platform that will connect other people with similar needs across the country. Using artificial intelligence and block chain technology, it will create opportunities for women and children to connect and share information about jobs, housing and other resources.

Looking back, Topeka says she is grateful that “I made up my mind that I had a plan and would execute that plan. Did I know so many opportunities and doors would open? I didn’t think it would be that quick, but I knew I’d do it.”
LaLa Zannell: Pushing Back Against LGBTQ Violence with a Passion

By: Catherine Wald | July 30, 2018

New York’s five boroughs are experiencing an increasing number of hate crimes targeting the LGBTQI community. In the first half of 2017 alone, at least three gay men and one transgender person were murdered in the Big Apple, according to the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (NCAVP). LaLa Zannell is one person who’s working to change that.

“Many people are surprised at the violence that still happens. It’s still not a safe world, even in Manhattan,” says LaLa, Lead Organizer at the New York City chapter of NCAVP. These crimes range from attacks by strangers to violence in intimate relationships. “People don’t realize that gay men can experience domestic partner violence, sexual harassment and assault – and that it still happens a lot,” LaLa says.

LaLa first came into contact with the NYWF-funded nonprofit as a client, and immediately felt an affinity for the counselors who worked there, “They really cared. They were so kind and gentle, and they gave me options based on what I wanted to do, not just what they wanted me to do.”

Victims of LGBTQ violence have a unique range of concerns based on their living situations, immigration status and personalities. While an outsider’s first impulse is often to involve police in domestic situations, it may not be practicable – and it may even cause more harm than good, for victims in the LGBTQ community. “I didn’t want to call the cops — and AVP supported me in that. They respected the fact that I’m the expert in my own life,” LaLa says.

By now providing services to people with similar experiences, LaLa strives to provide the same kind of individualized, non-judgmental support AVP has always provided. The New York office now offers a 24-hour bilingual hotline, staffed by one dozen trained volunteers, and a rapid incident response team that’s ready to take appropriate action whenever violence is reported.

But AVP does more than react to ongoing threats. It helps clients rebuild their lives with career counseling, legal services and advice on how to obtain health insurance. It also provides a space where people can participate in weekly support groups that build a sense of safety, self-esteem and empowerment.

LaLa’s work also takes her directly into the community, working hand in hand with political figures and members of different neighborhoods to raise awareness and educate the public about the problems facing their Transgender/Gender Non-Conforming (TGNC) neighbors. To help make New York City more welcoming, LaLa works with city council members across the city to talk about issues in such areas as employment, education, housing, health care, policing and immigration. This makes them more aware of disparities and the lack of supportive resources in various neighborhoods.

Equally important, LaLa leads efforts to gather the hard data that’s needed to support outreach and public policy efforts. For example, “there was a lot of research done about employment for TGNCs in places like D.C. and California, but there wasn’t much here in New York City.” That’s why LaLa recently spearheaded the first trans discrimination survey in New York City, which will document disparities in city employment and workplace experience. “We ask if you have been mis-gendered, if you’re able to use the restroom of your choice, and whether your supervisor supports you when problems arise,” LaLa says.

Attended by members of the LGBT City Caucus, the meetings successfully led to a project brief later used at budget hearings and other forums.

As an experienced public figure who has spoken at the White House and testified before Congress, LaLa is especially concerned about passing on important knowledge and communication skills to the future generation of leaders. LaLa is especially proud of an NYWF-funded TGNC Leadership Academy that recently trained 10 individuals to add their voices to the anti-violence movement and to educate the public about how to support its efforts.
ing includes a workshop that teaches survivors of violence how to use their stories as a tool for healing and empowerment. After completing the program, participants were offered paid internships, some of which led to full-time jobs.

“The Leadership Academy is dear to my heart, because I’m not only empowering my identity, but I get to help push and challenge other folks to be thought leaders and political leaders. They learn how to run meetings, do policy work, campaign work and public speaking. There’s something so powerful in that,” LaLa says.

The NYWF also supports LaLa’s hope for transgendered people and CIS women to build networks and connections toward a much-needed culture shift. “I really appreciate that NYWF is willing to have those hard conversations with us. They have included us and encouraged us to move to the forefront and take on leadership roles. That is amazing to watch and see.”

Working with the NYWF has further reinforced LaLa’s belief that LGBT and CIS groups have a lot to offer and teach each other. “I see a whole generation of folks who are willing to open their minds to a world in which there will always be different folks, and to understand and respect it.” LaLa adds that CIS people who decipher and challenge trans-phobia will discover that they have strong allies in the LGBT community and “we can collectively work together to challenge the system.”
Female Firefighters Doing The Heavy Lifting

By: Catherine Wald | August 19, 2018
Twenty-five enthusiastic but slightly wary young women signed on for a free introductory United Women Firefighters (UWF) Training Program Open House last month in New York City. During the four-hour event, co-sponsored by The New York Women’s Foundation, participants learned not only about the type of fire-retardant gloves they are required to wear, but where to buy the 50-pound weighted packs they’ll need for training, as well as key details about filling out forms and decoding other New York Fire Department (FDNY) expectations. One such expectation: They must show up one half-hour early for every appointment. (In the fire department, if you show up on time, you’re late.)

The women were also taught gym exercises in preparation for the physical exam. Training workouts included simulated firefighting drills such as pulling a 170-pound-loaded sled hand-over-hand by rope; tugging a 165-pound dummy back-and-forth across the studio, and dragging a fire hose tied to a 70-pound bag. Additionally, forcible entry drills, stair-training while wearing a 50-pound vest, grip strength builders and military-style calisthenics were also undertaken.

This day’s group included diverse women from all five boroughs, African-American, Asian, Latina and white women, and women of many different sizes and shapes. “Yet,” says instructor Regina Wilson, the UWF’s representative for Brooklyn and Staten Island, “You can’t judge which women make it into the elite ranks of female firefighters just by looking at them.” As the first African-American woman hired by the FDNY in 1999, she should know. “We’ve said, she’s too small or she’s obese, she won’t make it – but we’ve been wrong. We have all kinds of personalities, shapes, and beliefs. The only thing that matters is passion and desire and not wanting to give up.”

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Led by Sarinya Srisakul, president of UWF’s board, the UWF’s training program aims to not only prepare women to pass the physical exam (women accepted into the group must have already passed FDNY’s written test), but to also support them through any difficulties they may encounter throughout their careers. “We mentor the women while they’re in the Fire Academy and provide workshops before they start so they are the best prepared that they can be,” Srisakul says. After women are hired, UWF holds meetings, workshops and other gatherings to provide ongoing support. “We also advocate for our members, should they face any issues in their firehouses,” Srisakul adds.

Sarinya, who speaks Thai and Spanish as well as English, was the first Asian-American female to join the FDNY. She began her career as a fine arts student, while Regina came to the fire department from the corporate world. Some candidates in today’s group have family members in the police force; others have backgrounds in the military or as EMS technicians. Regardless, all want to dedicate themselves to hands-on work serving the public.

The odds against women, and the challenges ahead, still generate heat. New York City didn’t allow any women to take the firefighters’ test until 1977. Today, although New York has the largest municipal fire department in the nation, it has the second-worst record of hiring females, with women comprising only one percent of its workforce. (To put this in perspective, even San Francisco, the No. 1 force for hiring women, has only 15 percent.) In addition to dealing with physical challenges that can include carrying 125 pounds of gear and equipment up multiple flights of stairs, women face skepticism from the public and from other professionals as well.

“When I was training for the test in the gym, guys would tell me, ‘You’re going to fail,’” Sarinya recalls. “There was just a general attitude that women can’t do this. Even the woman proctor who gave the test laughed at us.”

After a 13-year career, Sarinya is still the only female in her firehouse – not to mention the only vegan. Although her professional brothers have become a second family, “I still search for that sense of belonging. Ultimately, it’s difficult when you are the ‘odd one out’ in the group. It would be tremendous to be able to work with at least one other woman on a regular basis.”

Until then, she is determined to lead UWF in making this career more accessible to future generations of women. “Between me and Regina, we have 19 and 13 years’ worth of advice,” Sarinya says. “We’ve seen women before us treated terribly; we’ve seen almost everything. Now we have a rich base of knowledge about how to handle issues and we all piggyback off each other – which makes it a lot better.”
would like to thank

The New York Women’s Foundation

for its funding of the series

**IN FOCUS:**
**Eye on Changemakers**

IN FOCUS: Eye on Changemakers is a collaboration between Women’s eNews and The New York Women’s Foundation (NYWF) to shed light on some of New York City’s most inspiring women-led non-profit organizations dedicated to empowering women and girls of diverse racial, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds.