

Latina
Business
Owners
In
Cambridge,
Massachusetts

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Introduction

The Cambridge Latino Oral History Project

The Cambridge Latino Oral History project began in 2002 with Professor Deborah Pacini Hernandez and a group of students participating in her Urban Borderlands class at Tufts University. In conjunction with Concilio Hispano's AHORA program, high school students from Cambridge Rindge and Latin joined the Tufts undergraduates in researching the Cambridge Latino community. Since this community had never been written about before, the goal of the project was, and still is, to raise the awareness and appreciation of the contributions of the Latino community to the city of Cambridge through sharing the oral histories of community members.

As the culmination of their research, the 2002 Urban Borderlands group released four reports detailing their findings on the history, culture, social services, and economy of the Cambridge Latino community. The economy report, *Latinos in the Economy of Cambridge: A Study in the Various Ways Latinos Participate in all Aspects of the Economy* by Rachel Long, Richard Nightingale, and Jessica Jimenez, provides a historic perspective on the economic participation of Cambridge Latinos, and is an invaluable resource to be used, in conjunction with *Latina Business Owners in Cambridge* for a deeper understanding of the topic. However, the 2002 report did not include any interviews with Latina business owners, so I set out to find them and document their stories.

Latina Business Owners in Cambridge, Massachusetts

Since there was no previous research to use as a starting point, I began by contacting various City of Cambridge departments searching for statistics as to how many Latina business owners are out there. There are no such statistics available through the city, but I did find the 2003 *Cambridge Minority & Women-Owned Business Directory* published by the Economic Development Division, Community Development Department. With that as my starting point, I was able to contact Alba Alvarez and Rosi Amador. I thought to email State Senator Jarrett Barrios, and he connected me to Consuelo Isaacson who led me to Raquel Ortiz. Finally, just through passing by, I spotted Mayra Muniz's restaurant, and she suggested that I also speak with Francisca Díaz who owns the bakery across the street.

The women that I found in Cambridge range from freelance professionals that work out of their homes to small business owners that own their own stores. They come from diverse backgrounds, yet many have faced the same obstacles in the process of opening and maintaining their businesses.

The six Latinas that are featured here can by no means be defined exclusively by their economic participation. These women are involved in the Cambridge Latino community and other larger communities through charity work, politics, religion, and education. Although the primary focus here is on their role in the Cambridge economy, these other parts of their lives can not be ignored, as they are intertwined with their economic participation, and vital to an understanding of the Cambridge Latino community as a whole.

Although I did not realize it at first, my interest in this topic became very personal. I started with the goal of filling in the gap in previous research since it was important to me that the women in the community have a voice in this oral history project. I ended up being deeply touched and inspired. As a college senior, about to graduate and enter the “real world,” I have my reservations. I don’t much care for the idea of working for someone else, but the reality of the situation is that it is much easier to do than starting your own business. I want to extend my sincere gratitude and endless respect to the Latinas who took time out of their busy schedules to share their lives with me, and show me by their examples that it is possible. To Raquel Ortiz, Consuelo Isaacson, Alba Alvarez, Rosi Amador, Mayra Muniz, and Francisca Díaz: you have all inspired me. Thank you for your time, your enthusiasm, and most of all for your stories.

Current Data

The 2003 *Minority & Women-Owned Business Directory* compiled by the Economic Development Division of the Community Development Department of the City of Cambridge is the most current resource on businesses in the area.¹ The *Directory* is a combination of the *Minority-Owned Business Directory* (1999) and the *Women-Owned Business Directory* (most recent edition, 1997) that had been previously put out by the City. The directory includes 389 total businesses that are listed both alphabetically and categorically in two sections, one for women-owned businesses, and the other for minority-owned businesses. It is intended as a networking resource for the businesses listed to market to one another and for larger businesses and city departments wishing to do business with women and minority-owned businesses.

Due to the methodology of its compilation, the *Directory* is by no means a comprehensive listing, but it is a valuable resource. I spoke with Elaine Madden, Senior Project Planner at the Economic Development Division about how she went about collecting the information for the listings. Since the *Women-Owned Business Directory* had been around since before Elaine came to the City of Cambridge in 1995, there was already a large group of women business owners actively participating. However, in 1999, when the first *Minority-Owned Business Directory* was researched, she told me that they had to start from scratch and go through the Cambridge phone book, looking at the

¹ For a historical perspective on Latino participation in the Cambridge economy see Rachel Long and Richard Nightingale, "Latinos in the Economy of Cambridge: A Study of the Various Way Latinos Participate in all Aspects of the Economy," Tufts University, spring 2002. For relevant data from the 1997 and 1992 Economic Census, see Appendix

surnames of business owners. Once a potential minority-owned business was located, they would call the owner and ask if he or she was a member of a minority group. The Economic Development Division uses the Federal definition of minority in their directory. Elaine told me that they placed ads in Cambridge newspapers and on Cambridge Community Public Television to raise awareness for the project. Because she was starting from scratch, many of the businesses became listed in the directory as a result of her just seeing them and going inside. “A lot of the listings in here are retail,” Elaine said, “because you can walk along the street and kind of know that Yoshinoya is probably a minority-owned business.”²

There are four businesses in the directory that are definitely Latina-owned: Bay Travel, owned by Alba Alvarez, Music Amador and Sol Y Canto, both owned by Rosi Amador, and the hair salon Glamourama, owned by Lourdes Bermudez. There are one or two other listings that may be Latina-owned businesses, but Elaine was not certain, and I was not able to contact the business owners themselves. Rosi and Alba are both featured in this project.

² This quote and all others by Elaine Madden are from Elaine Madden, personal interview, 27 Feb. 2003.

Resources

How the City of Cambridge Supports Women and Minority-Owned Businesses:

The Economic Development Division sent out questionnaires to the businesses that have participated in the various versions of the *Directory* since 1997, asking them what the City of Cambridge could do to better serve their needs. After compiling the results, the 2003 *Directory* includes a resource list for minority and women business owners in Cambridge, along with instructions on how to do business with the City and Cambridge Public Schools. The general resources listed include local, state, and Federal agencies. The economic development resources listed in the back of the *Directory* are mostly located in Boston with the exception of the City of Cambridge Economic Development Division, the Community Development Department, the Cambridge Business Development Center, the Cambridge Chamber of Commerce, and the Women in Business Connection. (See Appendix for a full copy of the resource list)

The Economic Development Division, Community Development Department:

Elaine explained to me the mission of the Economic Development Division in regards to supporting women and minority-owned businesses. “We try to help because of their difficulty, at least in the past, of connecting to powers in the business world such as bankers and other sources of capital,” she said. Her previous experience as a loan officer makes her an excellent liaison between business owners and lending institutions in the development of “capitalization strategies.” For example, she knows that banks want to see a business plan before they grant a small business start-up loan, and some entrepreneurs do not have the skills to write their plans in English, so she helps them do so.³

“Cambridge is an entrepreneurial city,” she told me. “People don’t realize that Cambridge just isn’t Harvard Square...Many of our businesses are minority-owned and in small neighborhoods.” The Economic Development Division has implemented several programs to assist these small businesses that are owned by low to moderate income individuals. Although these programs are therefore not exclusive to women and minority-owned businesses, they do offer support to the many that fall into that category.

The Economic Development Division started its own loan fund for small businesses in 1995. About 5 years later the fund was discontinued when the Division realized that they were competing with local banks also offering assistance to small businesses. Elaine was pleased to see that the banks “stepped up to the plate and realized that there is a lot of money in doing business with small business and realize the power of

³ For more information on the Assistance in Developing Capitalization Strategies program see www.cambridgema.gov/~CDD/econdev/captial

and the willingness to pay back loans of especially the immigrant community that want to start their own business.”

The Economic Development Division, in a partnership with Cambridge Savings Bank, now offers the Cambridge Savings Bank Small Business Loan Program. With a referral from the Economic Development Division or from the Cambridge Business Development Center, the Cambridge Savings Bank offers loans to business “with small borrowing needs who may have had difficulty obtaining financing elsewhere.”⁴ Small business owners in Cambridge may obtain anywhere from \$1,000 to \$25,000 through the program, providing that they have had an established business for a minimum of 12 months.

Elaine also pioneered the Best Retail Practices Program which trains store owners to set up the interior of their businesses in an appealing and marketable way. After a workshop instructs the business owners on things like window displays, lighting, color, and signage, the program offers an in-store consultation with architects and marketing experts. Elaine is in the process of adding some grants to the program to subsidize improvements to store interiors.

The Facade Improvement Program, which began in July 2002, offers matching grants to business owners that wish to improve the exterior of their location. For a full facade improvement, the City will match the business owner’s expenditures up to \$35,000, and for someone who just wants to improve signage and lighting, up to \$3500. The City of Cambridge provides an architectural consultant to create a concept and design that is appropriate for the architectural and historical context of the building at no

⁴ Information in the Cambridge Savings Bank Small Business Loan Program can be found at www.cambridgema.gov/~CDD/econdev/capital/index.html#/Available

cost to the business owner. Once the plans are approved by the City Review Committee, the owner hires the architects and contractors to complete the work, and he or she will be reimbursed for half of the cost up to the limits mentioned above.⁵

Elaine mentioned that there are large businesses that have a quota system that requires them to do a certain amount of business with women and minority-owned businesses. In the state of Massachusetts, the most common way for these large businesses to locate women and minority-owned businesses is through the State Office and Minority and Women Business Assistance (SOMWBA) listings. Women and minority-owned businesses may be SOMWBA-certified by the organization and then entered into a database that can be found at www.state.ma.us/somwba. By searching this database, large businesses can find local and viable small businesses that are women and minority-owned. It was puzzling to Elaine that out of the 389 businesses in the *Directory*, there are only one or two that are SOMWBA-certified. She attributed this to the possibility that “people just don’t know about it.” She is trying to set up a SOMWBA certification clinic through the Economic Development Division to raise awareness about the benefits of SOMWBA certification and assists local business owners through the process.

For more information on the programs mentioned above or on the services that the Economic Development Division has to offer call (617) 349-4637 or see www.cambridge.gov/~CDD/econdev/index.html

⁵ For more information on the Facade Improvement Program see www.cambridge.gov/~CDD/econdev/capital/fip.html

The Cambridge Business Development Center:

The Cambridge Business Development Center (CDBC) also offers programs to support the entrepreneurial spirit of Cambridge in all of its diverse manifestation. Its mission statement describes CDBC as “a community building organization” that focuses on “early stage companies interested in growth, both high tech and traditional businesses and extending access to business ownership to minorities, women and recent immigrants.”⁶ The organization started in 1992 when the City of Cambridge joined with the Central Square Business Association to assist business owners in the area. In 1994, the CDBC became an independent non-profit organization that continues to serve the city of Cambridge.

The programs offered by the CDBC are largely based on education and networking. For example, the organization offers two “Mentored Growth Groups,” one for service businesses and one for women-owned businesses, that unite already successful entrepreneurs with a mediator and 8-10 fledgling business owners. It is a forum for the new business owners to discuss their hardships and successes and receive advice from others that have been through similar experiences. These groups have three-hour meetings on a monthly basis.⁷

The CDBC’s Neighborhood Entrepreneurs Program offers a series of 3-hour workshops on various facets of businesses ownership. Topics include the legal, financial, and marketing aspects of getting started in business and creating a business plan. These workshops are \$35 for participants; however CDBC will waive the fee for those meeting

⁶ Information about the history of CDBC can be found at www.cdbc.org/about

⁷For information of the Mentored Growth Groups program, see www.cdbc.org/business/mentored.html#mentored-women

the Federal HUD guidelines for low/moderate income. There are also several 1 ½ hour seminars during the CDBC's Brown Bag Lunch Series. These seminars are \$20 each and cover such topics as starting a website, word-of-mouth marketing, e-mail marketing, and accounting systems. Two-hour long Tax Workshops are also offered at a cost of \$35. Although the majority of the CDBC's services are available for a small fee, they do offer one workshop, a 2-hour seminar entitled "How to Establish Good Credit," free to all participants.

For more information on these programs or other CDBC services see www.cdbc.org or call (617) 349-4690.

The Cambridge Chamber of Commerce:

The Cambridge Chamber of Commerce does not offer economic development resources that directly assist women and minority-owned businesses. What they do offer are networking opportunities and inclusion in their members listing and events which leads to exposure for the business within a larger business community. These benefits are consistent with those offered by other Cambridge business Associations such as the Central Square Business Association and the Harvard Square Business Association.

The Women in Business Connection:

The Women in Business Connection (WIBC) is a networking group formed by women that spun off from the Women's Committee within the Cambridge Chamber of Commerce to form a "freer" organization. In her spare time, Elaine Madden acts as the Treasurer for the WIBC, a young organization that already has 80 members. When I asked her about the minority representation in the group she told me, "it's not as good as we would like... We're very aware and very anxious to get more diversity." There are some African-American women in the group, but no Latinas. Because the WIBC holds many of its events at lunch time, Elaine realized that it was difficult for retail owners to get involved. It is not easy for someone who owns and operates a retail store to step out in the middle of the day to attend a meeting. The WIBC holds a few meetings in the evening to try and include retail businesswomen, but the organization is still attracting very few women of color. With little minority representation in the group right now, it may be uncomfortable for minority women to join. "There's a comfort level that people have to have with these organizations, to feel that they are welcome," Elaine noted.

Although she couldn't help me find many Latina-owned businesses in Cambridge, Elaine thought that, with time, there would be many more. "I would bet that if you came back in a year or two," she wagered, "I would say many more Latina women were trying to start businesses. There is a lot of support." It is true; there is a formidable effort on the part of the City of Cambridge to support women and minority-owned businesses in general, and although there may not be resources specifically tailored to Latinas, there is support available. Why then did only one of the six businesswomen that I interviewed

take advantage of these resources while many of the others felt forced to start their businesses on personal loans and credit? Elaine acknowledged that they included the resource list in the *Directory* because it was “likely that many businesses hadn’t heard of the resources” that the City of Cambridge has to offer.

Latina Businesses Owners

This research has indicated that there is by no means a unified community of Latina business owners in Cambridge. The first division that becomes apparent is the general bifurcation of the city of Cambridge into professional and non-professional communities. There are Latinas that are self-employed, working as freelancers out of their own homes, and then there are Latinas that are small business owners, operating stores separate from their residences. In addition to this socioeconomic divide, all of the Latina business owners interviewed come from distinct backgrounds and circumstances; however, some common themes surfaced as the project developed.

For nearly all of the Latinas interviewed, their work was inextricably linked to their culture. Whether through music, food, travel, charity work, or media activism, being Latina has been a defining factor in the ways in which they participate in the Cambridge economy. Although for some, culturally-based business has been a successful endeavor, several of the women interviewed expressed that they felt there was little support, economic or otherwise, for Latina business owners.

Each of the following six sections is the story of an individual Latina business owner, including biographical information, their views on living and working in Cambridge, and their insights into the Cambridge Latino community.

Raquel Ortiz

Independent Producer, Writer, Media Activist

“I forget sometimes. Sometimes now I look at the media and sort of see that there are all these Latinos all over the place...I’m not in that fray anymore but I know that they wouldn’t be there if I hadn’t done some of the work that I did. Now I just have to get there myself.”⁸

-Raquel Ortiz

Going into my conversation with Raquel, I knew that she used to be the producer for the long-running local program *La Plaza* on WGBH, a show devoted to issues concerning that Latino community in Massachusetts. What I didn’t realize was that I would be speaking with a woman who was such a pioneer in her field. “When I started out in the media,” she said, “whenever you saw any of us [Latinos], we were always doing something wrong or bad and getting caught at it...I was part of the struggle of opening up the doors of television and radio to people of color: to African Americans, to Hispanics, to other minorities, and to women.” This was a process that was “very hard, very frustrating.” Looking at the media now, 35 years later, Raquel can see the progress that has been made thanks to her efforts, and the efforts of others like her.

Raquel Ortiz was born in the South Bronx, where she lived, surrounded by her extended Puerto Rican family, from 1945 to 1963. Her grandfather worked in the tobacco industry and his “seductive encouragement” lured her parents from Puerto Rico to the United States. “Unfortunately they did it right before I was born,” she told me, “and I’ll never forgive them for that.” When I asked why, she responded, “I’ve always

⁸ All quotes from Raquel Ortiz are from Raquel Ortiz, personal interview, 28 March, 2003.

believed myself to be Puerto Rican first.” She goes back to Puerto Rico often to escape the harsh New England winters, and so that she doesn’t “short-circuit.”

Her career in media began in the 1960’s. It has encompassed both national and local formats and has taken her to several places including Washington, D.C., California, Puerto Rico where she lived from 1974 to 1978, and finally to Cambridge. Initially she came to Cambridge because the Allston-based public television station WBGH invited her to come and start a new show devoted to the Latino community. At that time, Raquel was one of the few Latinas with experience in media, already having built up an impressive list of credentials.

Although Raquel considered living in Villa Victoria in South Boston, she moved to Cambridge simply because, “there was an apartment available.” That was 25 years ago. “When I chose to buy,” she told me, “I moved to North Cambridge because it was the most ethnically diverse that I could see...Cambridge is a mixed bag which is part of what makes it good.”

Her work at WBGH began with the development of *La Plaza*, a show that is still on the air. She was the producer, writer, and host, directly responsible for 12 years of the show’s success. After two years at WGBH, Raquel also became Executive Producer of Community Programming for the station. With Raquel at the helm, *La Plaza* combined current events, interviews, musical performances, and film acquisitions to provide the viewer with a variety not found on any other show in the area. There were other programs at the time that catered to the Latino community in Massachusetts, and she did not want to compete with them. The idea was not to be “better,” but to “be different so that we’re all valuable,” she said.

La Plaza addressed issues like interracial relationships between Latinos and non-Latinos, bilingual education, and the relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico, among many others. To raise awareness about the importance of the Census, Raquel broadcast a program in two versions, one in Spanish and one in English. She also interviewed notable Latino musicians, artists, and politicians. To reach her bilingual audience, Raquel told me how she developed a system to subtitle the programs along with a director when she worked at Channel 13 in New York. She brought the system to WGBH so that every program would always be accessible to English and Spanish-speaking audiences. This was before closed-captioning technology even existed.

Although WGBH was local programming for all of Massachusetts, Raquel told me that *La Plaza* did have a Cambridge connection: “I’m sure that they wouldn’t have even thought that there was a Latino community in Cambridge if it wasn’t for the fact that there was someone in their midst that lived here...Because I lived here, we probably did more about Cambridge than we might have otherwise.”

To answer the question, “Who’s Cleaning Boston?” *La Plaza* went to Cambridge office buildings to speak to the largely-Latino janitorial staff. *La Plaza* began as a studio show, because field equipment was scarce at WGBH. The resources were not available to go out into the community and make documentaries, because the equipment was being used by the news shows, but Raquel was “relentless.” “I pushed hard.” She said:

What we do is as important as what news does, period...It’s important for the typical public broadcast viewer to see a documentary that says to them--you know, you go into an office everyday that’s clean, and you know who’s cleaning it? It’s *these* folks, that speak *this* language, who come from *this* frame of reference, that you basically don’t see because they are the second shift. And even when you do see them, you ignore them, and maybe you should stop doing that...Anything that has to do with

Latinos in Cambridge, in Springfield, in Boston, is important because the non-Latino community needs to know that we're here; we exist, that we contribute, that we participate.

Even though Raquel has not been involved directly with WGBH for 10 years, she has remained an “interested party.” When I spoke to her, Raquel had just recently attended a fundraising event where three people approached her to ask about the show. “People still remember me as the host of *La Plaza*,” she said, and she would love to host a show again. Despite the show’s success and impact on the Latino community, WGBH has still not taken steps to make it “ongoing and national.”

Since *La Plaza*, Raquel has been working as an independent producer, and taking more time for herself. “I led a fast and furious life and it was great fun,” she told me, “and now I just want to have time to take a walk when I feel like it.” Among other documentaries, commercials, and educational projects, she made a 90 minute documentary, *Mi Puerto Rico*, that she described as a “personal journey” exploring her questions about relations between the U.S. and Puerto Rico. *Mi Puerto Rico* aired on PBS in 1996.

Now Raquel says, “I’m sort of vacillating between wanting to spend more time writing and not run a business and realizing that if I am going to make a living, I am going to have to run a business. So I’m starting another company called Noble Roar Productions and I want to do some special projects.” Currently, Raquel is in the process of writing a memoir about her childhood in the South Bronx. I asked her how that Puerto Rican community compared to the Puerto Rican community that she finds in Cambridge. “I don’t know that there is a Puerto Rican community in Cambridge,” she replied. “I know there are Puerto Ricans in Cambridge, like there are many other Latinos, but I lived

in the heart of the Puerto Rican community in the Bronx.” Raquel admits that working out of her home for the past 5 years has left her “very isolated” from any sort of community that may exist. However, she has noticed that things have changed since she first moved to Cambridge 25 years ago. “There are many more Latinos here now than there used to be,” she told me, “and they’re not just Puerto Rican and Cuban... We’ve grown a lot; we’ve grown in diversity. We have a representative from Cambridge now [State Senator Jarrett Barrios], which we didn’t have before.”

During our conversation, Raquel told me about a project that she was involved in with the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe in Cambridge that was particularly interesting and relevant to my own research. At a social event, Cecilia Soriano-Bresnahan and Ruth Hill, the oral history director at the Schlesinger Library, began talking. Ruth had just finished the Black Women’s Oral History Project and along with Cecilia, decided to facilitate the Latina Oral History Project. Raquel joined the group of about a dozen Latinas that were involved in planning the project. For four years, they met two times a month, eight months a year, to discuss their progress and plan the next steps. “It was skewed obviously to educational, professional women,” Raquel told me, “because those are the kind of women who I guess make the time or have the time to get involved in that kind of a project.” Raquel was interviewed for the project, as was Sarah Nieves-Squires, an African Puerto Rican who is an associate professor at Lesley University in Cambridge and is involved, along with Raquel, in the Big Sister program, encouraging Latinas to become Big Sisters. The group recognized that they needed to reach out to Latinas of all socioeconomic levels and backgrounds in order to produce a valuable oral history, and they made plans to do so: “After 4 years, we had done those interviews, we had come up

with a list of potential places to go for funding , we had come up with some sort of program for how to disseminate it and said ‘we’ve done the work, this has value, it should be pursued and you [the Schlesinger Library] should raise funds for it, and it died. We got frustrated.’”

The interviews that were done are housed at the Schlesinger Library and are available for research purposes, but the Project was never assembled or disseminated.

Rosi Amador

Owner, *Music Amador* (Latin Music booking Agency)

Company Director, *Sol y Canto* (Six member Latin ensemble)

“My mission is to build bridges between cultures and to promote and celebrate Latin culture through its music. That’s what I’ve dedicated my life to.”⁹

-Rosi Amador

The Boston Globe once called Rosi Amador’s band, *Sol Y Canto*, “Boston’s sublime ambassadors of Pan-Latin music,” and after speaking to her I understood why. Not only is Rosi passionate about her music and the musicians that she represents, but she is also committed to teaching her audiences while entertaining them. For Rosi, music, by nature, is educational. She told me, “I think that any time you’re singing about your experience, if you’re a person that comes from a Latino heritage, that *is* in fact educating people that might not already be aware of what another person’s life and culture might be like.”

Rosi, of Argentine and Puerto Rican heritage, was born and raised in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Her parents were both performers. Her mother was a singer, dancer and actress who performed in the U.S. and Europe with people like Jerry Lewis, Bob Hope, Dean Martin, and in Mexico with the famous “Cantinflas” (Mario Moreno). After starting out in radio in Buenos Aires, her father toured Latin America as an actor.¹⁰ They encouraged Rosi’s love for music, but valued education as the top priority. When she was 16, the family moved so that Rosi and her sister could take advantage of the educational opportunities available in the United States.

⁹ This and all other Rosi Amador quotations are from Rosi Amador, personal interview, 16 April 2003.

¹⁰ A short biography of Rosi Amador can be found on www.musicamador.com

In the very early 1980's, after finishing high school in Philadelphia and college at Bryn Marr, Rosi came to know North Cambridge through a boyfriend that lived in the area. She moved there partly because of him, but mostly because she loved the youth and culture of the neighborhood. Always optimistic, Rosi thought, "invariably there would be something I could figure out that I could do here." Soon after, in 1984, she embarked on her first mission as an ambassador, a "life-transforming" experience that would change her passion for Latin music into a career.

In the mid 1970's, she had been involved in the world of performing arts as an Arts Administrator for the Underground Railway Theater, a national traveling theater group addressing social and political issues. On the job, she learned to schedule and book shows and tours, but she was not performing herself. "I was not really trying to build a future with music in it," she said. Although she loved music, she admitted that she was "not finding the courage to get out there and do it because it was too scary financially." Rosi had always had a passion for singing, but the potential economic hardships coupled with the warnings from her performer parents had deterred her from making it a career.

"It was fate," she said as she told me about her 1984 trip to Nicaragua. She applied and was chosen to go on a cultural exchange tour organized by the Ministry of Culture. A group of artists and musicians went to the country, "as a symbol of solidarity with the people of Nicaragua" in this time of social and political turmoil. There she formed her first band and her first business, *Flor de Caña*. The band featured Rosi as the lead vocalist along with several musicians including Brain Amador, her husband-to-be.

They toured the country, playing in a wide variety of public and private venues such as parks, schools, festivals, and even factories.

When the group returned, “deeply transformed by the trip,” they wanted to share their experience with others. Rosi brought her experience back to the United States through her music, and *Flor de Caña* started to do public performances “as a means of documenting the trip.” The performances were so successful that they started receiving calls and bookings for more shows. With her experience in managing and booking performing arts acts, Rosi was able to adeptly sustain the success of *Flor de Caña* for the next 10 years.

In 1994, *Flor de Caña* disbanded as the members began getting married, having families and going their separate ways. Rosi and her husband Brian did not want to stop playing music. They already had a mailing list of 10,000 fans, relationships with presenters, and a reputation in the area as musicians. So, they formed a new band, *Sol y Canto* which features Brian as the composer, musical director and guitar player, and Rosi as company director, lead vocalist, and bongo percussionist.

Rosi’s successful music career continued as *Sol y Canto* won Boston Magazine's "Best of Boston 1996" for Latin rhythms and the 1995 Boston Music Award for "Outstanding Latin Act". “Bilingual and multicultural, *Sol y Canto*'s music features a wide variety of Latin American and Caribbean dance and folkloric rhythms with a positive spirit. Invited to perform in venues from the White House to the Vancouver Folk Festival and from the Philadelphia Art Museum to University of New Mexico's Popejoy

Hall, the group has established a national reputation for its unique brand of Afro-Latin and flamenco-influenced repertoire.”¹¹

The band is rounded out by four other members that leave the “huella” (footprint) of their diverse styles and backgrounds ranging from Cuban to Uruguayan on the music. The group has earned critical acclaim for their albums *Sancocho*(1994), *Sendero del Sol* (1996), and *En Todo Momento* (1999).

Soon after forming *Sol y Canto*, Rosi started her own Latin music booking agency, Music Amador, that she runs out of her home in North Cambridge:

In 1996--two years after we founded the second band--I got pregnant with my twins, and as I was lying in my bed...driving myself crazy, because I am a very active person and I could not stand lying in bed--I decided to open an agency...I can't perform; I'm bedridden, so just get me my laptop and the cordless phone, and that's how I started my agency...I had been approached for years by a number of local artists--Latin artists--who were very talented and said, 'Look, you love doing this; I hate it. Why don't you do this for me; I'll pay you'...For the longest time I said 'No...I don't think so. I have way too much work with Sol y Canto,' but then I realized--you know I don't want to tour all the time, because I'm going to have twins, and I want to be home some more. I want to cut back. We did about 150 shows a year, and I just couldn't see it...So I started the agency. I started it with local artists.

At first it was very informal, but within about three or four years, Rosi started actively researching groups to find Latin acts with national reputations and building a rooster that includes six groups that she represents exclusively and 10 more that are non-exclusive. As she does with the pan-Latin music of *Sol y Canto*, Rosi offers a variety of talent through her agency in order to “bring Latin culture, in its richly diverse musical expressions, to audiences of all ages and backgrounds.”¹² In February 2003, she became part of a larger agency, the New Jersey-based Drake and Associates, as the Vice

¹¹ www.musicamador.com

¹² www.musicamador.com

President of their Latin Music Division and the Vice President of the Performing Arts Division for the East Coast and the Midwest. The merger adds some folk music acts to Rosi's roster, making it the first time she has ever represented music in English. "It's very accessible. What's the fun in that? It's not challenging at all," she joked.

Seriously, she added, "I love the artists I represent." Even with this new responsibility, she continues to run her agency, Music Amador, and to tour with her band, *Sol y Canto*, in about 40 shows a year.

I asked Rosi if, in the course of starting and owning any of her businesses, she had found any support as a Latina businesswoman from the City of Cambridge. Out of all of the women that I spoke to in the course of researching this project, Rosi was the only one that had in fact taken advantage of the resources that the City of Cambridge had to offer. Her two businesses, *Sol y Canto* and Music Amador, are listed in the *Minority & Women-Owned Business Directory* and for three years she participated in the Cambridge Business Development Center's workshops for entrepreneurs. The first year that she participated, she was even given a scholarship by the City to attend. Although she found support from Cambridge, she told me, "I don't think the fact that I was Latina had a whole lot to do with it." However, when we talked about the scholarship she speculated, "It's possible that they felt it was attractive to have a Latina woman on board, because most of the people that were on board were white, North American women."

Rosi has also been involved for over 20 years with the Latino Professional Network (LPN), a group serving the Boston area. It started with a handful of Latinos in the early 1980's in an Argentine restaurant in South Boston, and is now attracting hundreds of Latinos and corporate sponsors to its events. Although it is not a Cambridge-

based organization, the connections that Rosi has made there are impacting the Cambridge Latino community. “I have made some great connections directly out of those networking opportunities, directly out of it,” she said:

Most recently, a very good example of that is that it just so happens that the president of LPN is a man who works at Verizon...and it turns out that he is connected to the giving arm of Verizon. Right now they're considering two projects of ours, both related to the children's album, because they have a very strong focus on literacy. So right now they have invited us to submit a proposal for some educational residency work in the Cambridge area with the bilingual school, Amigos, and our own daughters' school, the Cambridgeport School... So all of that came out of my having attended for many years these events, introducing myself, wearing nametags, just for the purpose of meeting people...So I think that's benefited the different businesses that I have a great deal.

For this mother of seven-year-old twins who has always strived to educate through her music, a children's album is a perfect fit. It took four years of meeting with educators and parents, sending out surveys, and collecting data to compile the songs for the project. It was carefully researched and advised by a group of specialists in early education. The songs are mostly original, bilingual and upbeat and include themes such as numbers, days of the week and parts of the body. Rosi said that she and her husband Brian, the composer, chose some of the themes with their own daughters' education in mind.

When I spoke to her, Rosi had recently finished an educational residency program in Arlington where she did classroom visits with schoolchildren to teach them to play instruments and sing along with the songs. After spending time with them in the classroom, Sol y Canto performed a family show. Since the kids had been so involved in the music, and excitedly telling their parents about their days at school with Rosi, the

turn-out was great. This program was so successful that she wants to bring it to Cambridge.

Sol y Canto plans to perform a children's show with songs from the new CD at the Somerville Theater in November 2003. Although the venue is in Somerville, Rosi plans to make the event relevant to Cambridge by including the Amigos school choir, who is featured on the CD. Also, she is currently working with the Cambridge Health Alliance in order to use some of the ticket proceeds to benefit Cambridge Latinos. This will not be the first time that Sol y Canto has used its talents to help out the local community. The band participated in a benefit at the Sanders Theater for the Cambridge Housing Assistance Fund in which they raised over \$200,000. Also, in the 1980's, Rosi worked closely with Centro Presente in order to raise money and awareness for Central American issues.

Even though this is the first time that the band has released a children's album with an overtly educational purpose, Rosi has always found music to have an inherent ability to educate:

For us our goal has always been to build bridges, to make the music of Latin America accessible to all people, and that includes people from the Caribbean who are not familiar with South America and visa versa, as well as exposing North American people to Latin American music. We always make it a point to translate lyrics, to at least paraphrase what the meaning is, and sometimes we'll actually translate during a musical introduction or place the song in its appropriate cultural context—tell people when this rhythm might be played or when it might be appropriate to sing about this, so that's always a part of our concerts... We have, probably more than any other Latin band in the area, really gone out of our way to invite people in to the music, the culture. So they really feel like even if they don't understand every word, you get a sense of what the song's about. It's not just a bunch of notes that are really fun to listen to.

It is clear how much she loves to go and see the bands that she represents perform. With a gleam in her eye she said, “It feeds me so much to know people are enjoying and learning about Latin culture.”

In order to teach others about Latin music and culture, *Sol y Canto* offers workshops for music students and educators that incorporate performance and interactive learning, but Rosi’s passion for education is not limited to her professional life. It is important to her that not just her audiences, but her own daughters also learn about Latin culture. This has been difficult since the girls go to school with only a handful of Latino students and live in an area where there are few Latino families. Rosi lived in a rent-controlled apartment in North Cambridge for 11 years until rent control was abolished. She says that then it was a lot easier to find Latinos in the area. Although many of them used to, now none of the musicians that Rosi represents live in Cambridge. In order for her children to grow up with a sense of Latino community, Rosi told me how she managed to create one for them:

I think it’s so spread out that it’s hard for me. Here I am in North Cambridge. I don’t know where the Latino families are. Every now and then I’ll find someone in the park and say ‘hi’. I did as a result of having children and spending a lot of time in the park, meet some Latino families...when my girls were one and a half. As a result of meeting there by chance and hearing each other speaking in Spanish, we formed a group. Nothing formal...we get together once a month at one of our houses. The purpose of the group is to consistently speak Spanish so that our children will hear. Many of us speak Spanish at home, but sometimes there is one partner that is North American who will speak in English to the child or the children, and it has been a major effort on the part of all the families to encourage the children to speak Spanish and to read and write in Spanish, because it’s not easy when everybody else around you--and we all live here, where the majority of the people don’t speak Spanish, and it’s not easy. All of the kids go to non Spanish-speaking schools obviously so this group has become a major presence in our lives. I felt so strongly about it that I created a Spanish after-school program that takes place here on

Thursdays, and we found a teacher that we all approved of, and this is her 2nd year...It's fun...I would say that the growth of that particular program that I invented came directly from a local experience in the park, in Cambridge, with Latino families, and we created that community.”

The group is very diverse representing various nationalities including Chilean, Panamanian, Spanish, Cuban, Venezuelan, Argentine and Puerto Rican. They meet once a month during the school year and more often in the summer.

When she told me about the difficulties that she had finding Latinos in her own neighborhood, I asked her if she got a sense of a Latino community amongst the audiences that come to see her perform in Cambridge. Although *Sol y Canto* has a very diverse group of fans including North Americans and Latinos from the Caribbean, Central and South America, Rosi told me that when her band performs shows in Cambridge venues, she sees more North Americans than Latinos. She said, “For example at the RegattaBar, it tends to be-- the majority are more North Americans, it's where people feel comfortable. At festivals, we'll often have a larger showing of our Latino fans...We've played at lots of Cambridge River Festivals over the years.”

In addition to the festivals, there have been certain shows that have attracted Latinos from Cambridge and the surrounding areas. FleetBoston Celebrity Series commissioned an orchestral suite from Brian Amador. It was called *Prisma de amores* and was performed by *Sol y Canto* and 34 members of the Boston Modern Orchestra Project in September 2001. Rosi proudly told me that it was the first time the Series had ever commissioned a Latin ensemble, and many Latinos turned out for this event at the Sanders Theater in Cambridge. She said, “We had probably what for the FleetBoston Celebrity series was the most diverse audience they had ever had...There were a lot of Latinos in the audience. I can't tell you obviously how many, but it was clear.”

Rosi cited the lack of Latin venues as a barrier to the creation of a real Latino community based around music. “There’s no place that has strictly Latin,” she said, “There is no place like in Berkeley there is *La Peña*, that’s almost entirely Latin with a little sprinkling of other stuff. It’s been a fantasy of mine for a long time, opening a *Peña*...I would like to find or create a place that feels more like home.” She has created her own community once, who’s to say that this Latina entrepreneur can’t do it again.

For more information on *Sol y Canto* or Music Amador, see www.musicamador.com

For information on the Boston area Latin music scene, see www.candelaboston.com

Alba Alvarez

Owner, Bay Travel

“I feel that there is just so much needed in the world, and its just people caring, just taking the time...When people say, ‘I don’t have the time’--don’t tell me that. I have two businesses, I have six kids, and I serve on four different boards. Don’t tell me that. You make time for what’s important to you.”¹³

-Alba Alvarez

Alba Alvarez is a very busy woman, although she handles it all so well that you would never know. Despite all of the things that she has on her plate, her demeanor is relaxed and friendly, and she made time to talk to me for several hours at the new location of Bay Travel in West Newton, down the street from her home. Although she lives in Newton, Alba has a unique perspective on the Cambridge Latino community. As the owner of Bay Travel in Central Square, a travel agency specializing in travel to Latin America, she has helped many Cambridge residents travel back and forth, to and from their home countries. As a successful entrepreneur, Alba knows the importance of giving back to her community and practices it both in her professional and private life.

Alba was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina and lived there until age 8 when her father was offered a job in New York. Upon arriving in the States in 1972, he decided to take a job in Boston where he had a relative. The rest of Alba’s family joined him in 1973, and they lived in Jamaica Plain. Because of the large Latino population in the area, the bilingual program that Alba, her younger sister, and her older brother attended was largely in Spanish. She told me that they were learning very little English in school and were unable to help their parents translate and communicate with English speakers. The

¹³ This quotation and all other attributed to Alba Alvarez are from Alba Alvarez, personal interview, 2 April 2003.

family moved to Newton where the bilingual education was conducted with a stronger emphasis on English acquisition.

After high school, Alba wanted to become a stewardess, but her father wanted her to keep her feet on the ground, so he bought a travel agency in Chelsea instead. Before beginning work at her father's agency, Alba worked for 2 years at another agency to gain expertise and bring it back to her father's business. She worked for her father until 1988, when her life took a dramatic turn. At 23 years old, after 5 years of marriage, Alba became a widow.

After taking several months off to cope with the death of her husband, she decided to return to work, and, a year later, she bought the agency from her father using part of the life insurance money.

In 1989 Alba decided to open a branch of Bay Travel in Cambridge. The office was only 200 square feet, big enough for two agents. Alba told me how it rapidly expanded to meet the demand for travel to Latin America from Cambridge:

At the time we decided to open up one in Cambridge because we had so many clients from the area and it's a great area where everybody knows where Cambridge is. It's very diverse; it's easy to get to by the train, so we thought it was a good location...It was basically just for two people and we were going to use it as a satellite agency...but it actually became our central location, because we would get so many calls, we would get so many people... They were wonderful, wonderful years. The travel business was great...People were able to travel, people who normally would not travel would just because of the prices...The agency grew very, very fast. We had to take an apartment on the top, because we did not physically fit anymore...and our market was basically all Latin America.

When she first opened the branch in Cambridge, the overwhelming majority of her clients were Latinos going back to their home countries. She estimated, "90% of all the travel we had were Hispanics that are here going back to visit their families." Many

of them that she served were going back to Guatemala and El Salvador. The demand was so great there were two other agencies within blocks of Bay Travel that addressed this niche market. Fernandez Travel specialized in the Caribbean and Ryan Travel, owned by an Argentine man for 40 years, serviced the Haitian and Puerto Rican community. Now only Bay Travel is left, partly because the travel business is not what it used to be and partly because the Cambridge Latino community has changed. Alba said, "I think it's almost as though they are present and not. Rent is very high. I think a lot of them had to move out. Since Cambridge came off of rent control it has changed." This applies to both the Latino residents and the Latino-owned businesses in Cambridge. Bay Travel has moved its offices several times within Cambridge to deal with rent hikes. After rent control was terminated, the space that she had been renting for \$1900 a month became \$4000 a month. Alba moved the offices to a second floor space, and the previous location has remained unoccupied now for almost two years.

In the early 1990's the travel business was booming. Fare wares were driving ticket prices lower and lower and Alba recalled the lines that would stretch outside of Bay Travel's doors until midnight. Then, in 1995, airlines made regulations to limit commissions for travel agents, making the travel business more difficult. As of March 2003, there is no longer commission from the airlines so agencies must charge a fee. Alba makes a point to be honest with her clients and tells them how to get a cheaper ticket, even if it is not through her agency. She sees the business for what it is, and, although she has been successful by catering to this niche market, she knows that it cannot last forever:

I think that the fact that we have the niche that we have is--like my parents, they came to this country, they know enough English to get by,

they do not know enough English to go to an American agency, to call the airlines, to get online, to do the work themselves, so they feel comfortable coming to me. What's going to happen over the years is that their children, who are in college now, will not come to me...I think that eventually we will lose...You have to just reinvent yourself.

In order to serve the Cambridge Latino community, all of Bay Travel's agents must be bilingual to accommodate Spanish and English-speaking customers. It is this focus on customer-service that has always set Bay Travel apart. Alba is a very astute businesswoman. She told me, "Very early we learned that it takes three times for you to be satisfied to talk about something, and it only takes one bad experience and you'll tell nine people." Alba hopes that a satisfied customer may tell his or her boss so that Bay Travel can increase the business that they do with corporate accounts, a much more reliable business than personal travel these days.

Now Alba sees that Cambridge Latinos are going to Disney World, Cancun, Europe, and places outside of their home countries. They may go home for the holidays, but go somewhere else for vacations. Latino travelers want a Hopper pass, so they can travel within their countries to visit families or just to get to know their homeland. In general, Alba sees that Cambridge Latinos are becoming more adventurous with travel. For instance, they are going to Spain to find their European roots. Now she even sees a lot of Guatemalans, including older people, going to London. She explained, "They figure if we can live here and speak English, Why not go to another country?"

Even though the travel business is tough, and the benefits are getting worse and worse, it "a fun business," Alba said. She recalled an event early in her career that made her fall in love with her work. She told me the story of a Puerto Rican couple that came into the Cambridge office to plan their honeymoon. They were going back to Puerto

Rico to visit their families, but they went back every year, and their families would be at the wedding. They would go somewhere else, but did not know where to go. Alba began asking the man what he was interested in, and they started talking about bullfighting. When Alba suggested they go to Spain, he was ready to pack his bags. They planned a 17 day trip, and it turned out better than any of them could have ever imagined:

One of the days they went to Costa de Sol, it started raining, and so she decided to look up her last name, and I don't remember her last name, but it was very unusual, so she found three names all in the same city...he's telling her, 'in Spain you'll find every name'... She asked if there was any place that she could find out about the family...she went and looked them up, and she called them, and they were family with the family in Puerto Rico. So she was hysterical...she called her mom and her dad and said that they had found a great-aunt, and they couldn't believe it...they knew that they were from Spain, but...The family went back the next year--went back and found family, which I thought was so incredible. Every year after that he tries a new vacation place...Now he's gone everywhere, and just to think that if I had just let him go to Puerto Rico, this would have never happened. So I thought that was pretty amazing. It's amazing how much you can control someone's destiny, sending them somewhere else or just opening their minds sometimes or giving them that little push that they need to be adventurous.

She sends people all over the map, and has been to many of the destinations herself, but when Alba goes on trips to Latin America, she often goes to Argentina, where she was born, or Venezuela because her husband is from there. For Alba it is important that her kids go to Argentina and Venezuela too. "I tell them all the time that they need to find out about their heritage, where they came from," she said.

When I asked Alba if she knew of any Cambridge resources that supported Latina businesswomen she told me that she did not. She was adamant about the need for more support for minority women in business. When I spoke to her, Alba was about to attend a fundraising event for a group supporting entrepreneurial women in the hopes they might

meet this need for her and other Latinas who have had trouble accessing resources for their businesses. She said:

I grew up seeing everything, all the associations, all the funding, so I thought automatically that because, you know I'm--I thought--an American, it would be open to me, and it wasn't. It was very hard for me to get a loan. Afterwards when we wanted to move, I applied for a loan and they said no...I belonged to an association for women, and didn't get a lot of support there either, and I kind of understood. And in a way it's good because it just shakes you up and it says you either look somewhere else or you've got to do it on your own. Unfortunately not everybody's like that, and they give up.

In Cambridge, although Alba sees little formal support for Latina-owned businesses, she feels that the city is friendly to minority business owners. "Cambridge gives you the freedom to be anyone that you are," she told me, "If you hair's purple, blond, brunette, it doesn't matter...I think that was probably the nicest thing. It was such a diverse city, that everybody felt ok."

In 1995, Alba signed a five-year contract to be part of a large travel agency franchise. They trained her to go out and get corporate accounts. "Did I ever get 'no's,' she said. "When someone sees me from the Old Boy's Club, he's not going to even want to talk to me, and I've learned through failures what you need to do." She has learned that the secret is to "just be a little bit more bold," even though it may be hard at first. "I thought I could never ever in my whole life be that," she said, "but you have to if you want to survive and continue."

After these experiences of rejection and being discounted as a professional, Alba had built up her defenses. She recalled:

I remember when I went to look at the space, at the bigger space; I was so nervous that I brought my lawyer. I was so nervous because I really wanted the space. And I thought this guy is going to look at me and say 'no'. 'One, you're not a man, and two you're Hispanic. Get lost.' But it

was Cambridge. He had been there since 1960 and he was used to Cambridge. He was great to me.

Alba described how this experience inspired her. “I feel that when I went into Cambridge, that landlord helped me...he could have told me ‘no,’ but I feel that the same way that he helped me at that time, you give back. And what do I have? I don’t have a lot of money, but I have experience, and if I can help someone, I do.”

She is a member of the Hispanic-American Chamber of Commerce, a Boston-based organization. She commended the work that the organization, headed by Gerardo Villacrés, is doing for the Latino community in the area. In her opinion, a serious obstacle in the way of the success of Latino-owned businesses is a competitive attitude:

One of the things that Hispanics have is, ‘I can’t talk to you if you’re my competition, because you will try to take my secrets away,’ instead of opening up to that person, and you could help each other, and you can learn from her mistakes, and she can learn from your mistakes, and I could tell you all the good things that have happened that maybe might help you...That’s what’s missing and I think that Jerry is bringing that together, so that we can try to learn from each other. If he can bring that across, we will be much better off...A window breaks, I call the Chamber, ‘Do you have someone listed for fixing my window?,’ because I want to support Hispanic businesses...That’s what Hispanics need to understand, that you’re going to grow with that...You will grow along with everyone else.

Alba is the Vice President of the Hispanic Lions Club in Newton, and she nominated Jerry Villacrés for the Lions Club Humanitarian Award. He won the award this year. Alba is also active in other Latino-oriented organizations such as Casa Nueva Vida in Jamaica Plain, among many others.

For more information on Bay Travel, see www.baytravel.net

For more information on the Hispanic-American Chamber of Commerce, see www.hacc.com or call (617) 261-4222

Mayra Muniz

Owner, El Coqui Restaurant (December 13, 2003-April 1, 2003)

“The traditional dishes...the whole point of what the restaurant is--I want to take you to Puerto Rico.”¹⁴

-Mayra Muniz

Walking into El Coqui, it was evident that Mayra Muniz wants to take her customers to Puerto Rico by serving up her mom’s traditional dishes like *mofongo*, *sancocho*, and homemade *flan*, but more than anything, she wants to go there herself. She has only been back to Puerto Rico once, when she was 10 years old, after leaving Jayuya at age three. Her two older brothers and four older sisters go back often, because they grew up there, went to school there, and have friends to visit, but Mayra and her younger sister grew up in Cambridge. They attended the public schools in the area, including Cambridge Rindge and Latin.

Mayra told me that, many years earlier, her mother had been to Cambridge with her husband. They had heard that there may be work for him there, but the trip was unsuccessful, and they returned to Jayuya. Then her husband passed away, leaving her to fend for herself and provide for her children, so she returned to Cambridge:

They had a bunch of other children, and then he passed way, and then my mom didn’t want to stay in Puerto Rico, and she wanted to work. And in Puerto Rico, if you don’t have a husband, you can’t survive. I mean in those days--in the 40’s--you know what I mean--the husband was the one that brought home the food. So for a woman to work in those days with eight children--it was impossible. So she--the only other places she’s ever known was here. They came here for him to find work at one point in time, so...she ended up coming back, and then she brought the rest of the

¹⁴ This quotation and all others attributed to Mayra Muniz are from Mayra Muniz, personal interview, 22 March 2003. A full transcription of the interview is available at the Tufts University Archives.

children here once she found a job and place to live and--you know--and then we've been here ever since.

Mayra's mom worked several factory jobs to support the family, while the older siblings helped out by taking care of the younger ones. It wasn't easy and, as Mayra said, "hand-me-downs were big in those days." Because her mother was always working, the family did not have time to travel, and Mayra feels that she missed out on the connection to Puerto Rico that her older brothers and sisters have. She lamented, "I have always said I wish I spoke better [Spanish] and knew more about my culture and been to Puerto Rico more like my brothers and sisters have. I wish...but it's because--it's hard to take your kid back to Puerto Rico when you have three jobs."

Mayra told me how she wants her own child to have a stronger connection to the Puerto Rican culture than she does: "I would like to have my child speak better Spanish than I do which is gonna be kind of hard when I can't even speak it. So I'll just have my older brothers and sisters come over and speak it all the time."

Although the restaurant is a bilingual establishment, Mayra admitted with a laugh, "I am more Spanglish." She said that often her Spanish-speaking clients will correct her, but she doesn't mind. "That's how you learn," she told me.

She opened her restaurant on December 13th, 2003. She told me the story of how she went from working in computer drafting, to opening her own business:

So I don't know--I got laid off and wanted to work for myself actually, and I was brainstorming with my roommate about it, and I was like, 'Well, what do you think about a restaurant? My mom could do the cooking--and what do you think?' 'Yeah, that would be great. Your mom's cooking is awesome!' And then we came up with the name; like I was trying to come up with different names that's Puerto Rican based, and then, um-- she loves frogs. She's a frog lady; we call her the frog lady. She has frog tattoos, and she has every frog--all kind of frog stuff...She was like, 'What's that thing that Puerto Ricans--it's like a big thing in Puerto Rico,

and it's a frog?' and I said, 'Oh, the *coqui!*' and she said, 'Oh that--that's a cool name,' and I was like, 'Yeah.' So, um, she has a tattoo that I really like, and it looks exactly like the logo.

Mayra chose to open up her restaurant in Cambridge because she felt that "Cambridge needed it." She noticed the lack of traditional Puerto Rican food and wanted to bring the dishes of her culture to the area. "I wanted it to be like very traditional dishes," she told me. "The main thing was I wanted to introduce people to--you know--*real* Puerto Rican food. I mean you go to a lot of Spanish restaurants and it's not traditional; it's not what you would eat if you went to the island." She laughed, "You're not gonna find subs in Puerto Rico."

Making this concept a reality was not easy, and Mayra found very little financial support, even from organizations that claim to assist women and minority-owned businesses. Mayra told me how she went to the Center for Women & Enterprise, a Boston-based organization:

It really was very difficult. I mean we thought we weren't going to be able to do it, because funding is not all there. I went through this organization, and they really scrutinized us. They didn't have the faith in our type of food and what we were trying to sell. We were going through Center of Women & Enterprise. They hooked us up with these people, but it was really difficult because they just didn't have the faith, and they didn't want to give us the money, so we had to find it other places. I mean it's hard, because starting up with just credit and small personal loans you limit yourself after like so many months because nobody wants--you know you've taken out so much money already--credit cards are maxed out and your personal loans--they won't give you probably more than two, if that. So if the business isn't bringing in money, it's hard to maintain it, cuz you have a huge overhead which is food-- you know--electric and gas and so on, which is not--it is not cheap--especially with the size of this restaurant. It's 1500 square feet--if people aren't coming in and we're not bringing in the crowd, we aren't making the money to pay the bills.

Mayra looked into small business startup loans, but since she had never owned a business before, the bank was hesitant to give her one. For Mayra, there is a difference in the way that banks treat men-owned and women-owned businesses:

I just do think a lot of times they do take men more seriously than women, and they feel that men's business are gonna make it and--you know--and women's businesses aren't, and--you know--women's businesses *aren't* gonna make it, because they aren't giving women the money to make it; they're giving it to the men. Which is hard...you can't fight that because it's always been there for years, and even no matter what the time...we still think like that--banks think like that all the time.

Despite all this, Mayra managed to open El Coqui with credit and personal loans. Her mother does all the cooking. "She's very picky, and she cooks it a certain way, and no matter how we try to cook like her it just never turns out right...She takes every dish personal. Like, she puts her personal touch into the dish, and she does take it very personal if someone doesn't eat it all, cuz in--in my culture we serve a lot of food and your supposed to eat the--everything on the plate, because that pretty much says that you loved the food," Mayra explained. She said that they have had to adjust the prices and portions several times. They started out with higher prices and larger portions, "piled-on plates" that reflected how food was served in Puerto Rican culture. People coming into the restaurant just weren't eating that way, so they had to cut back so they didn't waste so much food.

While I was there, Mayra's mother stepped out of the kitchen. Mayra signaled her to come over, but she didn't. They had a brief conversation, Mayra spoke English and her mother spoke Spanish, and then she disappeared back into the kitchen. "She's shy," Mayra told me. She said that people always want her to come out of the kitchen so that they can compliment her on the food, but she never does. Since she wouldn't come

out, one customer decided to go into the kitchen himself and kissed her on the cheek and hugged her and told her how amazing her food was. “It was actually cool that he did that,” Mayra said.

Since the restaurant opened, Mayra, who was four months pregnant when I spoke to her, has been working 80 hours a week. Her sisters help as much as they can, but they all have other jobs during the day. Since she owns the business, her mother cooks, and her sisters and nieces are waitresses and hostesses, El Coqui is not-only a Latina-owned business, it is also family-operated, and Latina-operated.

She estimated that 50% of her clientele was Latino, and most of them were Puerto Rican which she found “fairly complementary.” I asked her about the Puerto Rican community in Cambridge, and Mayra told me, “There is a large Puerto Rican community--not in this area in East Cambridge, but more towards main--like towards Central Square. There is a huge Puerto Rican culture there--I mean--there’s New Town Court, Washington Elms are all mostly majority Puerto Ricans over there. There is some a little further down near Inman Square a bit that are there, but here in this area are a lot a Portuguese and Brazilian, so sometimes we get that crowd come in here. But I notice a lot of Spanish people that come in--not all of them are from Cambridge. They come from different areas to come eat.”

Out of all of Mayra’s seven brothers and sister, only one is still in Cambridge, even though they are all still in Massachusetts.

Since she doesn’t have a wine and beer license--it has been to expensive and complicated to get one--Mayra serves sodas like Manta, Coco Rico, and Cola Champagne, “drinks that you’ve gotta grow up with or they’ll taste funny to you.”

In her own family, she sees that each generation is getting further and further removed from their Puerto Rican culture. She told me, “That gap--that generation gap--is starting to happen. We are starting to lose our Spanish--you know--like our Spanish culture a little bit, because sisters’ kids, families’ kids are starting to lose--you know--none of them really speak Spanish”

Now, with many Latino kids growing up with American food, Mayra decided to design a children’s menu with her computer drafting expertise. “A lot of the younger kids would just rather have a cheeseburger,” she said. With a healthy dose of humor, Mayra recalled her most embarrassing moment at the restaurant.

“I remember one time we ran out of hamburger rolls, and this little kid came in with his parents and he was, ‘I want McDonald’s! I want McDonald’s! I want a cheeseburger! I want a cheeseburger!’” she recalled. So they ordered a cheeseburger off the kid’s menu and got a “Puerto Rican burger,” instead, a burger on two slices of regular bread. “That’s what we grew up on,” Mayra told me. When the kid saw it, he screamed, ‘That’s not a burger!’ ‘Yeah it is,’ Mayra replied, ‘It’s a Puerto Rican burger.’ “The parents were looking at me like, ‘What the hell is this!’” The mother took the child out to the car while her husband paid. “You know they were gonna go to Burger King,” Mayra laughed.

When I asked her how business had been lately, Mayra told me that it was slow, but she was optimistic that things would pick up. She told me, “There’s not many Puerto Rican restaurants out there, and a lot of people don’t know about the Puerto Rican culture, and I just want to introduce it and say look--you know--this is really good food...It’s like when Chinese restaurants first opened. I’m sure they had a hard time.

Nobody knew about Chinese restaurants; nobody had ever eaten there and now they are so popular, everybody eats Chinese food like three times a week.”

On April 1st, 2003, after four and a half months, Mayra’s restaurant, El Coqui, went out of business.

Francisca Díaz

Owner, Miriam's Cakes and Supplies

“Así que ha sido interesante comenzar porque ha sido duro primero por no tener dinero y segundo porque hemos trabajado con nuestras propias manos desde un comienzo. Entonces, bueno, pues yo creo que es—es algo meritorio que uno—le cuesta más, quiere más.”¹⁵

-Francisca Díaz

(Therefore it has been interesting starting out because it has been hard, first because of not having money, and second, because we have worked with our own hands since the beginning. So, well, I believe that it is—it is something commendable that one—the harder you work, the more you want it.)

When I spoke to Francisca, her business had been open for only three weeks, and she was a fountain of perpetual optimism and faith that it was going to be a success.

Francisca Díaz was born in a rural town north of Moca in the Dominican Republic. She lived there until she completed high school, when she went to Santo Domingo for college. She did not finish her studies, and went to a vocational school instead to learn to be an executive secretary. After working in a bank for nine years, she decided to come to Boston in 1989. At the time of her decision, her son was two and a half years old and she had a brother that lived in the Boston area. She told me how she had gotten to know Cambridge by visiting her brother:

Mi hermano había vivido aquí yo había pasado unas vacaciones de unas semanas y realmente me gustó muchísimo y pensé que si algún día inmigraba a los Estados Unidos, quería inmigrar hacia Cambridge. Y así tomé la decisión y vine cuando el niño tenía dos años y medio. Primero porque la situación económica estaba muy mal en Santo Domingo y segundo porque quería ofrecerle un mejor estado a mi hijo en cuanto a estabilidad emocional y económica. Yo creo que este es un estado bastante bueno y para una mujer sola con un hijo creo que era una buena decisión inmigrar.

¹⁵ This and all other quotations attributed to Francisca Díaz are from Francisca Díaz, personal interview, 14 April 2003. A full transcription of the interview is available at the Tufts University Archives.

(My brother had lived here and I had spent a couple weeks of vacation here and I really liked it a lot and I thought that if one day I immigrated to the United States, I wanted to immigrate to Cambridge. And so I made the decision and I came when my son was two and a half. First because the economic situation was very bad in Santo Domingo and secondly, because I wanted to offer a better life to my son as far as emotional and economic stability. I believe that this is a pretty good situation and for a woman by herself with a child, I believe that it was a good decision to immigrate.)

When she got to Cambridge, her brother decided to move to Miami, and she was left to fend for herself as a recent immigrant to a new country. As many immigrants had before, Francisca found a community of support and friendship at St. Mary's Church in Cambridge.¹⁶ She told me about how it has affected her life:

Pero cuando yo llegué al año [1989], mi hermano decidió irse a Miami. Yo entonces, bajo mucha oración, le pedí al Señor que me ayudara a tomar una decisión correcta y me quedé sola. Me quedé sola en este estado sin familia, y sin inglés porque mi mayor problema ha sido el inglés, aprenderlo aquí. Pero yo decidí quedarme y yo católica entonces me apoyé mucho la comunidad de Santa María de Cambridge. Fue una comunidad que me dio todo tipo de ayuda emocional. Me ha apoyado siempre en momentos difíciles, en momentos de soledad y pasé diez años sola, sólo con las amistades y los vecinos y una buena comunidad que tengo.

(But when I arrived that year [1989], my brother decided to leave for Miami. So I prayed to God that He would help me make the right decision, and I stayed by myself. I stayed by myself in this place without family and without English, because my biggest problem has been English, learning it here. But I decided to stay, and I am Catholic so the community of St. Mary's in Cambridge supported me greatly. It was a community that gave me all sorts of emotional support. It has always supported me in difficult times, in lonely times, and I have spent 10 years unmarried, with only my friends, my neighbors, and the good community that I have.)

¹⁶ For further information on the role of Saint Mary's church in the Cambridge Latino Community see Brigid Brannigan and L Seán Kennedy, "Latino Cultural Expression in Cambridge," Tufts University, spring 2002 and Andrew Hara et al., "The Evolution of the Latino Community in Cambridge, Massachusetts," Tufts University, spring 2002.

Francisca had taken some baking classes in Santo Domingo, and when she arrived in Cambridge, she needed to figure out something that she could do, despite the fact that her English was very poor. So, she decided to work in her home, taking orders from local residents for wedding and birthday cakes. She worked cleaning houses during the day and baked nights and weekends. She managed to take a few more baking courses and learned some tips from books and magazines that her sister would send her from Santo Domingo. After being in Cambridge for 11 years, Francisca decided to join her brother in Miami for three years. In October 2003, she returned to the area and now lives in Somerville, right outside Cambridge.

When Francisca first arrived, she found herself among many Latinas with the same predicament, what to do for a living in a country where they have not yet mastered the language. Francisca told me that most of her friends cleaned houses, but there were other things that Latinas did to participate in this informal economy:

También había muchas mujeres hispanas cuidando niños en la casa e iban a las casas de esas personas a cuidar a los niños, ves, pero yo encuentro que lo que más gustaba era limpiar casas porque no había que cumplir un horario fijo. Yo tenía las llaves de cada casa, entraba y salía cuando yo terminara y no había que cumplir un horario fijo, ves, yo la entraba cuando yo llegaba por ese...pues, había muchas mujeres limpiando aquí. Que es hoy en día otra cosa que ya no veo tanta gente limpiando, no

(There were also a lot of Hispanic women taking care of children in the house and going to people's homes to take care of children, you see, but I find that I liked cleaning houses best because I didn't have to follow a fixed schedule...There were a lot of women cleaning here, which today is another thing, you don't see as many people cleaning, no.)

Since Francisca lived and baked in the area for many years, she has known the majority of her clients, 75% at her estimation, from long before she opened her business. She was grateful that after being away for a few years, her clients were eager for her

return: “He vuelto a recuperar a todos mis clientes, gracias a Dios y la gente está muy contenta de que yo esté aquí” (I have gotten back all my clients, thank God, and people are very glad that I am here).

Now Francisca has family in the area that helped her open and run the business.

She told me:

Se presentó la oportunidad de yo abrir mi propio negocio con muchos inconvenientes porque sigo sola pero ahora tengo a mi hermana y a mi cuñado que son mis apoyos. Porque ellos no vivían aquí sino ellos vinieron conmigo desde Miami entonces nos estamos apoyando al uno al otro y decidimos abrir el negocio entre los tres. Pero básicamente yo soy la cabeza del negocio porque soy la que he vivido aquí y la gente me conoce a mí. Mi cuñado trabaja en otro *city* y mi hermana y yo trabajamos en la repostería. Es un negocio que está principiando...Pero ha sido un poco lento porque la economía no está tan buena como...Pero por la ayuda de Dios, vamos a echar para adelante y vamos a pensar que las cosas van a cambiar y van a mejorar. Yo tengo mucho optimismo; mi hermana también y pensamos que las cosas al comienzo son difíciles, pero creo que vamos a arrancar. Ha sido bastante buena en tres semanas que tenemos abierto, ha sido muy bueno porque hemos podido ir viendo que las cosas van a mejorar.

(The opportunity presented itself for me to open my own business with many inconveniences, because I am still single, but now I have my sister and my brother-in-law, who are my support, because they didn't live here, they came with me from Miami, so we are supporting one another and we decided to open the business between the three of us. But basically, I am the head of the business because I am that one that has lived here and people know me. My brother-in-law works in another city and my sister and I work in the bakery. It is a business that is just starting up, but it has been a little slow because the economy is not as good as...But, God willing, we are going to move forward and think that things will change and get better. I am very optimistic and so is my sister, and we think that things at the beginning are difficult, but I believe that we are going to get started. It has been good enough in the three weeks that we have been open; it has been very good because we have been able to go on seeing that things will improve.)

Before Francisca took over the location, the same person had occupied it for 27 years, and had left it in a disastrous state. In order to meet inspection guidelines,

Francisca and her family members had to do some serious repairs. It was hard work, but she didn't seem to mind. She laughed as she told me, "He aprendido hasta poner pisos en esta ciudad" (I have even learned to lay floors in this city). Although it was hard, for Francisca it was "algo meritorio" (something commendable) to work with her own hands to build her business. She spent a month preparing the store before it was ready to open.

Francisca has some Peruvian friends that are Harvard-educated economists. They helped her by going to City Hall and dealing with permits and inspectors so that she could open her business without having to confront the language barrier that she would encounter with these city officials.

When I asked her if she knew of any resources in the City of Cambridge that were supportive of her as a Latina businesswoman she told me that she knew some existed, but she had not yet sought out assistance from them. She had to start her business on personal credit. She said, "Sé que hay unas instituciones y he tratado de ubicar algunas porque necesito préstamos para expandir mi tienda porque he comenzado a base de crédito mío, mi crédito...Me gustaría extenderlo un poco más" (I know that there are organizations and I have tried to find some because I need loans to expand my store, because I have started on my credit, *my* credit...I would like to extend it a bit more).

Although it has been strenuous, both physically and financially, for Francisca to open her own business, it has been rewarding, and she prefers it to baking out of her home. She described for me the state of chaos that her house was constantly in:

Primero, tengo todos los moldes; los clóset están llenos de moldes. La cocina está full. Estaba porque ya los saqué, estaba full y el piso dondequiera había cosas de biscocho. Entonces yo me cansé honestamente yo me cansé de ver cosas en el medio, de no poder tener espacio físico para tenerlos en la casa. Y en segundo lugar cuando tú

trabajas desde tu casa, tú nunca descansas. Jamás descansas porque la gente se acostumbra que tú estés allí.”

(First, I have all the baking pans; the closets are full of baking pans. The kitchen is full. It *was* full because I took them out already, it was full, and there was cake stuff all over the floor. So, honestly, I got tired of seeing things everywhere, of not being able to have the physical space to have them in the house. And, secondly, when you work out of you home, you never rest. You *never* rest, because people get used to you being there.)

She told me how she would get calls at six in the morning, mealtimes, and even midnight from people wanting to place orders. “Y el tiempo tuyo—tuyo como persona—tú no lo tienes cuando trabajas desde tu casa” (And time for yourself-yourself as a person-you don’t have it when you work out of your home), she said. Now she opens the bakery at 9:30am and closes at 6pm, leaving her work there, separate from her home. She told me, “Yo quiero dejarlo aquí en la tienda. Dejarlo aquí, cuando vuelva al día siguiente seguir con el trabajo pero en la tienda. Entonces la idea mía es esa, más privacidad, para mi vida personal y mi vida de la familia” (I want to leave it here in the store. Leave it here, and when I come back the next day, go on working, but in the store. So this is my idea: more privacy, for my personal life and the life of my family). Even though it is much better now, she still had to bake one cake at home last week to complete her 19 orders.

You can get more than just cakes at Miriam’s Cakes and Supplies; there are piñatas, candles, cake decorations, and all the tools you would need to make a spectacular cake yourself if you were so inclined. Although most of her clients come to order cakes, she told me, “la idea mía es tener las cosas que ellos quieren para una fiesta” (My idea is to have all of the things that they want for a party).

When she was baking out of her home, the majority of her clients were Salvadoran, but since the shop has opened, she has acquired many North American clients as well. “Los Americans se están interesando en los biscochos dominicanos” (Americans are becoming interested in Dominican cakes), she told me. Along with the usual birthday and wedding cakes, Francisca bakes Dominican cakes that have different types of fruit fillings.

During the two hours that I spent with Francisca in the shop, I witnessed first hand the difficulties that she sometimes experiences dealing with these English-speaking patrons. Upon her request, I translated a few requests here and there as best as I could, but overall the interactions were pleasant and friendly. Talking about cakes just seems to put people in a good mood. However, there was one encounter that gave me a disturbing glimpse into the added hardships that Francisca has to face as a Latina business owner who speaks and understands little English. “Soy bruta para entenderlo” (I just can’t seem to get it), she told me.

When Francisca first arrived in Cambridge, she found out about the Amigos school, a Cambridge school that operates as a language exchange program between Spanish and English speakers.¹⁷ The program had just started and after speaking with the directors, she was able to put her son in the school, beginning in kindergarten. He stayed in the Amigos program until the 8th grade when they moved to Miami. It was very important to Francisca that her son speak both Spanish and English. She described to me the sacrifice that she made in order for her son to preserve his Dominican culture:

Yo también cuidé mucho, quizá fue un descuido para mí porque por el hecho de que yo no quería que el me hablara el inglés en la casa yo quería

¹⁷ For more information on the Amigos program see Lyndsey Parman, “Becoming Bilingual in Cambridge,” Tufts University, spring 2003.

que él no tuviera acento en el español...Entonces yo le decía no, en la casa nada de inglés y el niño no me decía ni un número en inglés en la casa. Pero fue mal para mí porque quizás yo hubiera podido aprender bastante el inglés pero yo quería--yo quería sobre todo que él conservara su origen.

I was also very careful; it was probably a disservice to me for the fact that I didn't want him to speak to me in English in the house. I didn't want him to have an accent in Spanish .So I told him no, no English in the house, and the child didn't say even one number in English to me in the house. But it was bad for me because I probably could have really learned English, but I wanted—I wanted above all for him to conserve his heritage.

As I was speaking with Francisca, a sales representative from one of the companies that she bought cake decorations from came by to pay her a visit. Francisca had ordered some figurines of babies to place on top of cakes. She showed me the merchandise: baby boys with electric blue bonnets and baby girls with florescent pink ones. These were nowhere near the pastel shades represented in the company's catalog. When the sales representative came in to check on what she thought of the merchandise, he was, or at least acted, shocked that she didn't like the colors. He swore that he had never had a complaint, basing his argument on the assertion that products made in China just look like that and Francisca should have known better. He told her that she could send the products to the company at her own expense, and receive store credit. He either didn't realize, or didn't much care, that his client was not understanding the majority of what he was telling her. I translated what he was saying when she asked me, and tried to ask him the questions that she want to ask, but couldn't formulate in English, but clearly this was a frustrating experience for Francisca. It made me wonder what their first meeting was like when he convinced her to order from him, and how many more of these guys she has to deal with.

When he finally left, she told me, “Por lo menos yo que estoy comenzando, sabes, que no tengo esa cantidad de dinero para disponible entonces como me lo devuelve en crédito. Y yo no le quiero comprarle a ella [la compañía] porque me manda cosas feas.” (At least for me who is just starting out, you know, I don’t have that kind of money to spend, so how are they going to give it back to me in credit. And I don’t want to buy from them because they send me ugly things.) The sales representative told her that she could call the company if she wanted to talk to someone about getting her money back, knowing full well that she did not have the English skills to do so.

With each interaction with an English-speaking customer, Francisca understands more and more and her inhibitions about speaking to them in English and her fear of making mistakes are disappearing. Even just three weeks after opening her business, I had to stop the interview several times so that she could wait on customers, and I was more than happy to do so. I can see why Francisca and her sister are so optimistic, and I wish them the best.

Visit Miriam’s Cakes and Supplies at 544 Cambridge Street or call (617) 868-8121

Conclusions

After speaking with Elaine Madden about all of the resources that are available to business owners in Cambridge, it was surprising to note that two of the small business owners that I talked to started their businesses with credit and personal loans. Mayra Muniz even had to close El Coqui because of it. This reinforces Elaine's prediction that many business owners are not aware of the services that the City of Cambridge has to offer.

In the case of Francisca Díaz, it is possible that a language-barrier was responsible for her lack of awareness as I did not see any information available in Spanish on the Economic Development Division, CDBC, or Cambridge Chamber of Commerce websites. Although this is not a decisive indication that these groups are ill-equipped to assist Spanish-speaking business owners over the phone or in person, it does suggest the possibility. I called the organizations to investigate and neither one of them had specific Spanish-language or bilingual program available, but assured me that they could provide a translator. At the CDBC, they said that they would love to be able to provide services specific to Spanish-speakers, but they are a small organization with limited funding. The need is there, and the organizations want to help, but there seems to be a severe lack of communication between the City of Cambridge and its Latina business owners.

The only Latina business owner that I spoke with who was able to take advantage of these resources was Rosi Amador. She spoke highly of the CDBC workshops for entrepreneurs, but she did say that she was the only Latina involved in them at the time.

Resources such as Latino Professional Network mentioned by Rosi and the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of which Alba is a member are not listed in resource list of the *Cambridge Minority & Women-Owned Business Directory*. The only resource listed that is specific to Latinos is Concilio Hispano de Cambridge whose focus is not specific to business owners, but rather to needs of the Cambridge Latino community in general. These other resources mentioned would be a valuable addition to the list since they are being utilized by Latina business owners in Cambridge as successful networking tools.

The communication problem seems to work both ways. Many of the Latina business owners are not aware of the programs that are available to them through the City of Cambridge and thus feel that they have little support, but at the same time, the City of Cambridge does not seem to be aware of the organizations that exist to serve the community of Latino business owners in Boston and the surrounding areas, including Cambridge.

There are many variables to consider in attempting to draw conclusions about the relative success of these Latinas and their ability to tap into available resources. Raquel Ortiz was born in the United States, did not attend college, and has achieved great success, as has Rosi Amador who is college-educated and did not come to the U.S. until she was sixteen. For Rosi and Alba Alvarez, who both enjoyed extensive professional careers, networking with other women and Latino business owners has been a top priority. Even though these connections may not have been directly responsible for the acquisition of economic development resources, they definitely brought about opportunities to grow their businesses and learn from other business owners. For both

Alba and Rosi, networking has been an ongoing endeavor that has involved seeking out organizations, getting involved, and being outgoing and active participants in a variety of events. It is very likely that these networking connections allowed Rosi to find out about and take advantage of the CDBC workshops.

When I spoke with Mayra Muniz and Francisca Díaz it seemed that, although they may have known other business owners in the community, they did not mention networking as an important part of their roles as small business owners.

As a prospect for future research into the topic of Latina business owners in Cambridge, it would be significant to follow-up with Francisca Díaz at Miriam's Cakes and Supplies in order to see if she was able to find business development assistance. Since, like Mayra, she started her business on credit, she is in a precarious position. The reasons for the future success or failure of her business could provide some insight into the ways in which the City of Cambridge is or is not meeting the need of its Latina business owners.

When speaking to Francisca, the topic of the informal economy surfaced. She mentioned that there were many Latinas that cleaned houses, watched children, and cooked, as she did, out of their own homes. Although this may be a difficult topic for which to find narrators still in the area, it would be an interesting angle to pursue.

The story that Mayra told about her mother working factory jobs to support eight children, made me wonder how many other Latinas did the same in Cambridge. Mayra's mother was not interested in being interviewed, but there may be other Cambridge Latinas who went through similar experiences and as pioneers in forming the Cambridge Latino community and as economic participants, their stories could be rich and valuable.

Another Latina business owner who, much to my disappointment, was not included in the project, is Lourdes Bermudez, the owner of Glamourama, the hair salon at 270 A Broadway. She has owned this successful business and lived in the community for many years, but was not interested in participating in the project. For anyone interested in further research on this topic, hers is a vital story to include.

Even though it is not directly related to the topic at hand, I had a conversation with Consuelo Isaacson¹⁸ (see Appendix) that opened a door to another Cambridge Latino community that has not yet been studied. The Cuban community that revolves around humanitarian and political efforts is an active and powerful force in Cambridge. This group, which includes State Senator Jarrett Barrios, acts as ambassadors from Cambridge to Cuba on a regular basis, and for anyone interested in how the Cambridge Latino community affects the larger world, it would be an excellent starting point.

¹⁸ Consuelo Isaacson, personal interview, 14 March 2003.

Afterword

I hope that now, after reading their stories, you too have been inspired by the Latina business owners in Cambridge. If so, please support them. Next time you need a birthday cake, give Francisca Díaz a call. When you see that *Sol y Canto* is going to play at a Cambridge venue, go and see them. If your professional or personal travel plans take you to Latin America, let Alba Alvarez arrange your trip. These Latinas have worked hard to open and run their businesses, and they love what they do, but they cannot do it without the support of fans and loyal customers.

The experience of researching and compiling this oral history project was accompanied by a digital storytelling workshop led by David Zarmeno of Cambridge Community Public Television. Using images that I gathered during my research, I created a three-minute digital movie entitled *Wonder Women*, as a tribute to the amazing accomplishments of the Latina business women that I met along the way. The story can be seen on CCTV.

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Useful Websites

Bay Travel: www.baytravel.net

City of Cambridge, Economic Development Division:

www.cambridge.gov/~CDD/econdev/index.html

Candela Boston: www.candelaboston.com

Cambridge Business Development Center: www.cbdc.org

Hispanic-American Chamber of Commerce: www.hacc.com

Music Amador: www.musicamador.com

Appendix

1992 Economic Census Data

1997 Economic Census Data

Minority & Women Owned Business Directory Resources List

Consuelo Isaacson Interview

Photographs

Raquel Ortiz

Rosi Amador

Alba Alvarez

Mayra Muniz

Francisca Díaz

Consuelo Isaacson

“Cambridge feels cosmopolitan...It’s very comfortable for someone like me, a Cuban Catholic married to someone who is part Russian, part Hungarian, Jewish, and this is perfectly ok here...its just normal; its just what people are, all sorts of strange combinations.”¹⁹

-Consuelo Isaacson

Although she may no longer officially be a business owner, Consuelo Isaacson worked out of her Cambridge home as a freelance healthcare consultant for many years. Nowadays, her passion for humanitarian work in Cuba has eclipsed all of her other pursuits. “This whole thing consumes a lot of my life,” she told me.

In 1960 Consuelo left Cuba in to come to Miami. She went from Miami to New York and back, then to Allston, and by 1985 she was living in Cambridge. She has had a variety of careers including advertising and child welfare. For 11 years she worked for the state of Massachusetts, and she also had a job at Boston City Hall where she taught emergency Spanish to the Park Department, police, firemen, and many others. By 1987 she was working as a freelance health-care consultant.

In 2000, 40 years after she left, she went back to Cuba for the first time and “really got hooked.” After such a long period of time away, I had to ask why she decided to go back. She responded, “I went back because I thought I could be of help, and also, I mean, I was dying to go back, but I had no really reason to go back. I didn’t want to go as a tourist; I wanted to go with a purpose.” As an active member of Caritas Cubana, Consuelo was invited by the head of Catholic Charities to go to Cuba. She accepted, and she is glad that she did: “It changed my life. It changes the life of everyone who goes”.

¹⁹ This quotation and all others attributed to Consuelo Isaacson are from Consuelo Isaacson, personal interview, 14 March 2003.

Since then, she went again in 2000, twice in 2001, three times in 2002, and when we spoke she was preparing for her fourth trip so far in 2003. She was going to go to a conference in Havana for Cubans living outside of Cuba, and hoped that they could come to some conclusions about how travel to and from the country could be made easier for them. Every time Consuelo takes a trip, she must wait 4-6 weeks for a \$150 visa.

Now Consuelo's mission is "the reconciliation of Cubans with Cubans," to get as many Cuban-Americans to Cuba as possible, and in doing so, she has found many Cuban-Americans in Cambridge. "I have also gotten together a huge group of Cubans that I have found all over this area, and you would be amazed at how many there are," she told me, "but they're all just sort of blended in. A lot of these Cambridge Cubans, including Jarrett Barrios,²⁰ the Massachusetts State Senator who represents the district which includes Cambridge, have traveled to Cuba together, and all of them have taken on different personal humanitarian projects. Some of these projects include taking medical and educational supplies to Cuba, disaster relief, and hosting Cubans in need of medical attention or Cuban artists in their Cambridge homes. Consuelo showcases an extensive collection of Cuban art, much of it with Afro-Cuban influences, in her Cambridge home.

At first Consuelo was nervous about living in Cambridge, but she has grown to love it, and feels very comfortable there. "I'm Cuban and I'm very, very anti-communist. I'm not a right-winger, but I'm not a left-winger and I always thought Cambridge was very left," she said. But the diversity and tolerance of the city has made her feel at home. She has found that there are several Cuban communities in Cambridge, some more liberal than others. She get together regularly with her neighbors during the day for lunch and

²⁰ For more information on State Senator Jarrett Barrios, see www.barrios.org

the area women even have a book club. “We all work, but nobody works 9-5,” she told me.

I told her that I surprised to hear about this active Cuban community since a Cuban influence is not all that visible in the area. She corrected me by mentioning that the restaurant Chez Henri (1 Shepard Street) has the “best Cuban food in town” and the Montrose Spa (1646 Massachusetts Avenue) has great Cuban sandwiches.

In Consuelo’s humanitarian work in Cuba, she realizes the importance of working both inside and outside of the established government institutions to enact change, but understands that her efforts alone are not going to revolutionize the system itself:

What I do has all kinds of purposes and they are all miniscule, but one thing is the humanitarian work that in the big picture is miniscule, but for those individuals it saves their life. So for them it’s huge, and for me it’s also huge because it’s a tremendous amount of work and commitment and sometimes it can be really emotionally draining. So that comes first. I think also being a good ambassador to Cuba is a very important thing.

Raquel Ortiz

Rosi Amador

Alba Alvarez

Mayra Muniz

Francisca Díaz