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BUSINESS WOMEN

Helping others a calling she never fails to answer

'It's a great feeling to plant a seed in those people's lives.'



GIVING HOPE: From left: Clinica Esperanza/Hope Clinic Vida Sana Director Lavinia Velazquez, Medical Assistance Program Center case manager Luz Betancur and Together We Insure A Safer Tomorrow Assistant Program Manager Angela Amaral. PBN PHOTO/RUPERT WHITELEY

BY MICHAEL SOUZA
PBN STAFF WRITER

When choosing her profession, Lavinia "Vinnie" Velazquez never thought twice. She has spent a career in the human-services field working with the homeless who might have chronic mental-health issues, working with those battling abuse problems or advising prostitutes to straighten out their lives. Some might find it difficult, but not Velazquez. "I consider myself lucky to have the opportunity," she said.

She is a woman with many hats, working at the Clinica Esperanza/Hope Clinic, 60 Valley St., Providence. There she leads their Vida Sana, or clean-living, project, where volunteers organize health fairs and advocate for members of their community. The volunteers, or navigators, help guide people through the health care system, and the clinic provides free, high-quality medical care and preventive services to Rhode Islanders who don't have health insurance or cannot afford to purchase health care.

"I love this field, it's great to get people the treatment they need and help them," Velazquez said. "When they come back you can see that glow in their eyes that is priceless. It's a great feeling to plant a seed in those people's lives. I am very blessed."

At a young age, Velazquez saw the need for better health care

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services for those in poverty or simply unable to speak in English. "I knew right then what I wanted to do," she said.

Now 43, Velazquez is originally from Puerto Rico, and moved to Lawrence, Mass., when she was 6 years old. "When I was a student at [Greater Lawrence Regional Vocational Technical High School] I took some home-economics courses that included some nursing classes," she said.

"I was there with my parents when they were going through some medical problems. I had to be an 'old' child and learn to navigate my way through the system because there was nobody there to help me." With that in mind she saw the need to help those who would be in a similar position in the future.

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By the age of 16 she was on her own but became involved with a YMCA-sponsored health program. With that limited experience and a passion to help others, it was a natural fit. It opened up a new world, to assist with health education and prevention. By the time she was 17 years old she was working with a lot with drug addicts and homeless women through the YMCA program. "I think it gave me a sense of belonging. When I was growing up I always helped my family, even with translating. I acted like the oldest child even though I wasn't," she said.

For years she adopted a hands-on approach, meeting with clients to better their lives. As to be expected, there were failures and victories. "In this field sometimes we want to know what impact we make. To me that was measured with each individual," she said.

She has worked at the Medical Assistance Program Center at 66 Burnett St. Providence, for the past 11 years but will be leaving soon due to decreased funding. As program director she focused on addiction and overall preventive health with high-risk minorities, including HIV.

She also works at Progreso Latino in Central Falls as the director of their wellness center. Progreso is dedicated to helping the Latino and immigrant communities attain better self-sufficiency. "At Progreso it's a whole different kind of poverty with its own issues. It's poverty that's not about drugs – although in some cases it might – but immigration and other circumstances. It's a whole different set of problems than found at [the center]," Velazquez said.

As she gained experience, Velazquez worked to get a college degree, balancing work with education. The process took years, taking sporadic classes at the University of Rhode Island, before receiving a

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bachelor's degree in human services from Springfield College in 2007. She quickly followed that with a master's degree in organizational management and is currently pursuing a doctorate in education from Cambridge College.

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"I found that their focus was on body, mind and spirit," she said of the school, and it brought a whole different element into her work. "In order to be a better director and to be better at what I do, I felt I needed those degrees.

"Springfield allowed me to put all my life experiences in a framework that made sense. It gave me a sense of fulfillment but also helped me to understand and work in a system that at times can be difficult," she said.

Her 25 years of experience help her recognize where the system and service can be improved. She is a strong advocate for community health clinics. Although the Medical Assistance Program Center and Progreso are invaluable, better medical facilities would help people get the wellness and care they need. "I haven't been able to accomplish that piece at either site," she said.

Now more than ever, her expertise is needed in the community. "It's overwhelming. At Progreso Latino, where we used to get 40 people, we now get 60 or 70. We had a vaccine day this past summer and over 180 people came. There's so much need and not enough resources," she said.

"About one out of every three people we see need to be in a medical clinic. ... Clínica Esperanza is booked until April. We have people with very chronic diseases so we try to get them in there rather than use the emergency room."

Despite the workload and the emotional toll it can often take, she says she has the best career she could have imagined.

"It's one thing to do it if you have to; it's another thing to do it because you want to," she said. "It's a great process to see some of these

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