

Hoping to foster Hispanic business leaders towards chamber presidents

Patchogue chamber launches new committee

BY LINDA LEUZZI

Barbara Guerra, the owner of Dahlia Fashions on East Main Street, has been a member of the Greater Patchogue Chamber of Commerce since she opened, nearly two years ago. Her women's clothing store is stocked with colorful, stylish modestly priced clothing and accessories and she caters to both the Anglo and Hispanic communities.

"It's a great balance and that was my goal for both," she said of her bilingual store. A native of the Dominican Republic, Guerra came to this country when she was 19. Her fashionista sense was honed as a district manager for Rainbow Shops, headquartered in Brooklyn, which began in 1935. "I supervised nine stores on Long Island; that's how I decided to work here," she said. "I noticed it's a big Hispanic community."

She's a member of the new Hispanic Business Leaders Committee that formed within the Greater Patchogue Chamber of Commerce.

"They should get more involved and they don't," she said of her colleagues. "I think it's time."

Guerra said she was approached by Jim Datri, a chamber member, to join the new committee.

"He came up with the idea to get the Hispanic business community together," Guerra said.

Datri is a Bellport resident and chamber civic member. "I've known [chamber executive director Dave Kennedy] for quite some years and always had an interest in minority groups," Datri said. Datri worked last fall on the Christmas Holiday Parade of Boats. "We discussed having a Hispanic business member as a judge and I was in charge of getting the judge," Datri said.

Jose Bonilla, owner of Bravo Supermarket and La Confianza Delicatessen and Restaurant, next door to each other on South Ocean Avenue across from the Long



Barbara Guerra (right), owner of Dahlia Fashions, with employee Pamela Perdono. Guerra is a member of the Greater Patchogue Chamber of Commerce's Hispanic Business Leaders Committee.

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Island Railroad Station, was chosen. While Datri got Bonilla involved in the boat parade, there were conversations about gathering Hispanics to form a leadership committee in the chamber.

It was Datri who took the bull by the horns.

"I just decided to go around to the Hispanic business owners in the community," Datri said. "We had a couple of meetings and there were about two dozen who showed up at each meeting. The discussions were very lively and now we're

forming a Hispanic leadership committee in the chamber."

The chamber will hold its next networking event, Launching of the Chamber Hispanic Business Leaders Group, on Thursday, May 15 from 5 to 7 p.m. at LUDA, Latinos Unidos De America, located at 180 West Main Street on the second floor of the Salumed Pharmacy building. A wine and cheese reception will be provided.

Bonilla, who started his supermarket where Copper Beech Village now stands in 1997, stressed it won't be a separate arm of the chamber, but part of it. And those chamber events or initiatives that evolve will be explained to others not part of the committee or the chamber. "We want to be stronger with the chamber, not separate," he said.

"We have many Hispanic businesses and can see where we can help in humanitarian efforts," said Bonilla, who hails from El Salvador.

He aids customers regularly who are struggling with a family illness or death, he said. "People come and ask me, 'can I have a box of food or plantains for a family member in the hospital?'" he said. His simpatico has extended to the Inglesia Evangelica Refugio de Salvacion, the small church on the corner of Railroad Avenue and Unity Place, where he provided labor and electrical work, he said.

"I am blessed," he added. "So you help others."

Patchogue Mayor Paul Pontieri said he spoke to Bonilla when he first opened his supermarket in the village, suggesting that he incorporate items not just for Hispanics, but to also include Anglo products. "That store services my mom, my sister, Copper Beach Village and ArtSpace and he turned it into a community market," Pontieri said. "I think the Hispanic business leaders and the chamber's thrust should be, 'how do we bring everyone into the

community so we all take care of each other,'" he said.

Kennedy said the chamber is hoping to foster Hispanic business leaders, who will become future chamber officers, including presidents.

"I think we have 20 that stood out as Hispanic businesses, and about half are village businesses," Kennedy said on Monday. "I'm having an informal meeting tonight with some of them to talk about how we'd like to structure this committee. On May 20 is when we'll have the full committee meeting."

Floral Designs by Rafael owner Rafael Carrasquel, who attended Monday night's meeting, moved to Patchogue two years ago. He was born in Venezuela and his mother is from Colombia. "I saw the opportunity here and my lease was up in my other flower shop in Mineola and it's been great," Carrasquel said. His storefront is located at 61 North Ocean Avenue in the old Paul the Tailor building; his business had its grand opening in January. "When we had our first meeting a couple of months ago, there was a lot of confusion," he said. "Monday night, we tried to come up with the major points of what the chamber of commerce is and what it can do for Hispanic business owners. We Hispanic people not only work hard here, go to school here and have businesses, we are more than the Hispanic people that come to this country to work."

Kennedy, who said Patchogue was one of the first villages to welcome Hispanics including Puerto Ricans in the 1960s, said the humanitarian effort that Bonilla discussed is a desirable goal.

"There are a lot of people who don't understand what the chamber is," Kennedy said. "It made it important to me that if we want to attract more Hispanic members, that we're serious about including them with a leadership committee." ■



Jose Bonilla, owner of Bravo Supermarket and La Confianza Delicatessen.

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