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Conference aims to inspire local Latinas

Event to give women tips on gaining foothold in corporate America

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By Gregory Tejeda - Times Correspondent | Posted: Thursday, March 4, 2010 12:00 am | No Comments Posted

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HIGHLAND | A Houston-area attorney who once was a vice president with Macy's Inc. wants Latinas to be more aggressive in advancing themselves for business opportunities.

Wilka Toppins, a native of Puerto Rico who bills herself as "the Corporate Latina," wants all Latinos, but particularly women, to work harder to attain positions in corporate America.

"We need to educate ourselves in order to reach the highest levels of our society," said Toppins, who will be the keynote speaker at a women's conference to be held Saturday at Wicker Memorial Park social center.

The conference is sponsored by the Northwest Indiana chapter of the League of United Latin American Citizens. The league's Midwest vice president, Alicia Rios, said Toppins provides "an example we can all follow."

Toppins wants to see an increase in the numbers of Latinas who get into the business world. She said Latinos in general need to increase their overall levels of education to bolster their skills.

"Until our education level is on par with everybody else, we're never going to be a leader," Toppins said.

But Toppins said Latinas face an additional potential barrier -- cultural traits that make women think their natural place is nowhere near the corporate boardroom.

Toppins admits younger generations of Latinas who were born and reared in the United States are not growing up with this belief, which means that eventually this issue will disappear. "Younger Latinas are doing much better than their older counterparts," she said.

But Toppins said older Latinas should not be counted out, even though they need to aggressively work to break with past perceptions. "There are cultural traits that hinder the women, and we're not going to get ahead until we start thinking of ourselves as leaders," she said.

Toppins, who worked for Macy's as a vice president of diversity strategies and also was a staff attorney for Exxon and SBC Communications, thinks groups such as LULAC are working hard to try to advance all Latinos, including women.

Aside from the Saturday appearance at the Indiana LULAC chapter event, Toppins also will speak at the LULAC national women's conference, to be held April 9 in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

She specifically cited the group's work toward encouraging Latinos to take their education more seriously.

"This is a big, big problem, and (LULAC) is working to resolve it," she said.

"They're taking it seriously."

If you go:

What: Second annual women's conference, sponsored by the League of United Latin American Citizens

When: 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday

Where: Wicker Memorial Park social center, Ridge Road and Indianapolis Boulevard, Highland.

Fee: LULAC members \$10, nonmembers \$15.

Contact: Alicia Rios (219) 662-3966.

FYI: Aunt Martha's Health Services will have its mobile health unit at the conference, where a doctor, dentist and nursing staff, will offer full examinations free of charge.

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