



BUILDING BRIDGES

AS SMALL BUSINESSES REEL from recession shock waves, Gale Castillo, president and one of the founding members of the Hispanic Metropolitan Chamber in Portland, offers support to both Latino and non-Latino business owners. This month, she is participating in the National Hispanic Leadership Institute's Executive Leadership Training program in San Juan Bautista, Calif. A small business owner herself, Castillo is also a member of Portland Mayor Sam Adams' economic cabinet.

Q How has the recession hit the business of your members?

A During the best times, our community has not necessarily been the beneficiary — they've struggled. On average, small businesses make about \$900,000 a year. Latino businesses make about \$100,000 a year. During these harsh economic times, Latino businesses suffer even more. We have a lot of firms that are not getting contracts, not getting paid. We're trying to work with them to help them be creative regarding their financing, marketing and contract opportunities.

Q What are the current Latino business trends?

A Nationally and locally, three sectors have a concentration of Latinos. One is construction; another is service — lawyers, attorneys, bookkeepers and personal services such

as salons, nails, dog groomers. The third sector is retail, including restaurants and small stores. Of those three sectors, the service sector is doing better than construction and retail right now. But even the service sector is not doing that well.

Q What does the future hold for Hispanic businesspeople?

A I think the possibilities are unlimited. We have a lot of professional Latinos coming to Oregon for the same reasons that other people come to Oregon, for career opportunities. These individuals and their children are not going to be limited by anyone else's stereotypes.

Q What stereotypes are still fought?

A I think there is still an assumption that Latino contractors or business people are lesser than non-Latinos. One of our goals is to

increase the visibility of Latino businesses, and let people know what their capabilities are, and encourage large corporations and contractors to consider using their services. It's been an educational piece for Oregonians, and Portlanders in particular. When we had our very first luncheon I had one individual tell me, "I have never seen so many professional Latinos in one room." So people are still trying to grasp the understanding of our community. They're still operating from old stereotypes about who we are, what our capabilities are. In many cases they still see us as foreigners. But we're changing stereotypes in the community, for the whole community, not just businesses, and we're trying to create opportunities for our young people. If we're just talking to ourselves, we're not doing a good job. I have to talk to others outside of our community to learn from them, but also to help the general community understand who we are. It's about building bridges.

JENNIFER FURNISS