

# Alianza to launch professional development initiatives

BY SHARON BALTES

**A**lianza, the Latino business association serving Greater Des Moines, is celebrating signs of progress from its first year of operation and planning to launch a wave of initiatives targeted at professional development.

Alianza was launched Sept. 28, 2004, as an affiliate of the Greater Des Moines Partnership, and it has grown to more than 30 members. Nannette Rodriguez, owner of VivaMedia, a Clive-based Hispanic marketing firm, serves as the group's president. Rodriguez said Alianza has attracted a diverse membership ranging from service professionals such as herself to "blue-collar professionals" such as restaurant owners and automobile mechanics.

"I'd say we're doing remarkably well for such a young organization," Rodriguez said. "It's been a really challenging year with getting the group started, but it's been one of great successes because now we're bringing recognition and exposure to the Latino business market in Des Moines."

During its first year, Alianza hosted a series of monthly business workshops to educate Hispanics on a variety of business topics, including tax preparation, marketing basics and technology for small businesses. Each session was conducted in Spanish, something that the group's predecessor, the Iowa Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, didn't do. The Hispanic chamber was established for about four years before it dissolved in November 2003.

Another accomplishment of Alianza was the introduction of a new event, LatinExpo, in partnership with the Neighborhood Development Corp. The Latino business and resource trade fair was held June 24 on East Grand Avenue, an area being transformed into a Latino-owned business district.

"One of the lessons learned from the Hispanic chamber that we really took to heart this time is that a lot of Latino business owners feel most comfortable in their native language, and we wanted potential Hispanic business members of Alianza to feel at home if they were to visit our events," said Enrique Peña, the membership chair of Alianza.

Now that Alianza has developed its programs and resources to "make sure Latino businesses stay viable and don't close up shop," Rodriguez said



Similar to the redevelopment efforts of the Latino corridor along East Grand Avenue, Alianza, the Latino business association, is also in the process of developing plans for its future. Shown here are several of the group's board members: Jose Ramos, Brando Guerrero, Sergio Corona, Nannette Rodriguez and Max Cardenas.

the next step for the organization is to develop its networking and professional development services to benefit people of all backgrounds, but particularly young Latino professionals. She will donate some of the proceeds from a national Latina entrepreneurship award she received Sept. 15 from Wells Fargo & Co. and Latina Style magazine to partially fund the new initiatives.

"I've noticed that there's this pocket of bilingual and bicultural professionals who seem to get in a niche answering phones in Spanish for companies like Principal [Financial Group Inc.] and Allied [Insurance] and they never venture out of it," Rodriguez said. "They aren't making themselves visible in their companies, and they're getting overlooked for upper management jobs."

"They're smart enough and educated enough that all they need is a little polishing to make them more visible within their organizations and get them into leadership positions to exert more influence in our community and add to our city's diversity."

The first initiative Alianza plans to launch in late 2005 or

early 2006 is a four-part professional development series covering topics such as professional etiquette, profiles of influential people in Greater Des Moines, business resources and a practicum to practice these recently developed skills.

The second initiative, called Pachanga Nights, will be social and networking events to support members' businesses and make Alianza more visible among Latinos. The group is partnering with El Latino newspaper to publish photos of these events to showcase "who's who" in the Latino community.

"I think it's going to open up a new venue for our members and our organization to be more visible," Rodriguez said.

Alianza has two events planned for October. It will hold a reception Tuesday, Oct. 11, from 6 to 7:30 p.m. at El Dorado Mexican Restaurant, 4345 Merle Hay Road, to celebrate its first anniversary, recap the past year's events and discuss plans for the coming year. On Oct. 28-29, it will present a seminar on starting businesses in America at the Commission on Latino Affairs' seventh annual Latino Conference in Des Moines.

"I think the Latino business environment is improving, but Des Moines still has a long way to go," Rodriguez said.

Max Cardenas, a business owner and Alianza's chairperson of legal affairs, believes that a thriving Latino business association in Greater Des Moines will fuel new businesses in the state by sending a message that this is a place supportive of entrepreneurs.

Cardenas said he hopes the Greater Des Moines business community continues to support the group's efforts so that more entrepreneurs from diverse backgrounds can build successful businesses and contribute to economic growth.

"Many Latinos here are immigrants, and they've already taken a huge risk by moving to a new place, so the risk of opening a business for them is second nature," Cardenas said. "Immigrant businesses are a huge opportunity, not just for the growth of the Latino community, but for the growth of the community as a whole. Diversity and support for entrepreneurs make a city an attractive place where young professionals want to live."

For more information on Alianza, visit [www.alianza-lba.org](http://www.alianza-lba.org). □