

Meet Miriam Mercado Mercado, Program Director *Paraíso Infantil, Hartford, Connecticut*

A Conversation With Bonnie Neugebauer



“When parents are needed, they are here.” Miriam Mercado begins her story by highlighting parent involvement as the touchstone of the programs she directs. “Family focus and parent involvement make both our family center, Centro de Desarrollo y Reafirmación Familiar, and our child care program, Paraíso Infantil, special. Families come to the center to both give and receive support. They are our board members, use services, become trainers, and receive training and advocacy support.

“Many parents come to the Family Center rather unsure about what they can offer; and through our parent involvement opportunities, they enhance their skills and become very active and effective in this community. When you value parents for who they are and make them feel comfortable, you create the opportunity to help them grow. Everyone who comes through the door has skills; everyone can learn from you and everyone can share with you. I am very proud of providing people with opportunities that result in the betterment of the community.

“Paraíso Infantil is one of many family support programs of Centro de Desar-

rollo y Reafirmación Familiar, which is part of the Institute for the Hispanic Family, a program of Catholic Family Services.

Three years ago, when parents involved in the Family Center learned about the Connecticut School Readiness Initiative, they saw the opportunity to create a program to meet the needs of families in the community. Other services provided by the Family Center to improve school readiness, involve parents in child development and strengthen family relationships, include: ESL, GED, and parenting classes; family literacy, transition to school, and family strengthening programs. The ‘Dare to Be You’ program is a family strengthening program that organizes local families to identify, select, and modify a science-based curriculum to meet the needs of the Latino/Puerto Rican community in this neighborhood. This program uses the ‘Train the Trainers’ model to build capacity in the community and prepare local families to become trainers for other families. Once families are here,

we can show them other resources they can take advantage of. We can help parents become better advocates for their children and provide early interventions as needed.

“Most of our families are from Puerto Rico, but we also have families from the Dominican Republic, Costa Rica, Peru, and Colombia. These parents want their children to speak Spanish and also be exposed to English. We are always fully enrolled with 34 children and a waiting list. Even though all our families are Latino or bicultural, we still have to be sensitive to cultural differences. Within the Hispanic culture there is great ethnic diversity. If we are talking about traditions or music, food, fiestas, or mealtimes, we must be responsive to this diversity. When we are working with parents, responding to child behaviors, or working to enhance our relationship with the child, we must be constantly sensitive to differences in perspective and language.

“Good communities start with children and families. We need people with education to offer children what they need to become strong and effective members of their communities. The school readiness initiative provides a great deal of support for teachers to grow as professionals and to have the education they need to provide quality.

“I’ve established good links with the early childhood program at Hartford Capitol Community College. We have created a bilingual CDA program. This opens the opportunity to potential workers who are not that comfortable in English, but who have the ability to become wonderful bilingual early childhood professionals.

“We are waiting for our accreditation visit from the National Association for the Education of Young Children. The entire process requires a lot of prepara-

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tion, resources, and support. The Early Accreditation Support Project provided important resources and technical assistance to strengthen our program during the self-study process. I am confident that we'll get accreditation because we are prepared. We want to provide quality and this achievement will confirm our ability to do so. This is the time of year when children who have moved on to elementary school are getting evaluations and grades. Many parents are calling to tell us how well their children are doing and to tell us, 'You helped my child.' Because we have the support of so many people and programs, we have been able to provide quality services.

"As a member of the Hartford Area Childcare Collaborative, I am able to find out about resources and bring them to my community. It's important to bring as many resources as possible to this program so that teachers have the opportunities and information they need to address the needs of children and families in this Latino neighborhood. Because I have the opportunity to collaborate with others, I am able to bring information into this community that supports quality. Help is out there, but to get it, families need to be strong advocates in order to be heard.

"My involvement extends to the broader community as well. The Three Kings celebration in January is a city-wide event that I am coordinating this year. We provide 1,000 toys for children and have a parade that even includes the camels! I also founded Padres Abriendo Puertos (Parents Opening Doors), an organization that supports families with children with disabilities to advocate within the school system to obtain the services they need and to create system change.

"If we include parents and providers as active participants in our programs,

they have the opportunity to develop leadership skills that they can take with them to give back to the community. That's our goal. The community is the cornerstone of society. Parents deserve these opportunities to be part of the system and actively make decisions about services for their community.

"Una comunidad activa y saludable es fundamental en el desarrollo de una niñez sana, feliz y fructífera. Para llevar a cabo logros es importante que las familias que componen esta comunidad tengan acceso a recursos educativos, oportunidades de empleo, apoyo y oportunidad de aprender a ser miembros activos dentro de su vecindario. El Centro de Familia ofrece estos recursos y es una puerta abierta para el desarrollo de liderazgo y creación de cambios en nuestra comunidad."