



Laura Garcia: A Life Transformed

By Emma C. Redmond

She had talent, skills, a job she cared about, a newly-merged family, and she was content with her life and achievements. Then she attended SAMHSA's Leadership Institute. There, Laura Garcia realized she also had a dream.

When Laura Garcia received the invitation to participate in the SAMHSA Leadership Institute, she believed she would enjoy and benefit from the training. She was positive she would garner information that would enhance her position as a contract monitor in the Illinois Division of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse. In no way, however, did she see herself as a leader. So she arrived at the five-day immersion training prepared to be present for whatever was offered and confident that life would be much the same when the training ended.

Well, that was a good plan, but it didn't take into account buried dreams.

"The five days were absolutely wonderful," Laura said. "I connected with so many other people. But I had never thought of myself as a leader. I didn't think I had what it takes to fulfill such a role." During the immersion

training, her view of herself and her capabilities changed. "I began to believe that I could make a difference in people's lives. The Institute gave me hope that I could step out and do more with my skills and talents. It also helped that I had the opportunity to meet with and receive mentoring from those who already function in a leadership capacity," she said.

Once Laura completed the initial phase of the Institute, she knew that her life's work would change. She believed that she had crossed over into unknown territory and that the life she knew previously had been fundamentally altered.

With trepidation, she decided to take baby steps and not make radical changes. One of

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the requirements of the Leadership Institute is for participants to develop a project for presentation at graduation. "My initial thoughts were to develop a training institute, but I realized that most agencies do not have bilingual staff. I also realized that I was thinking small and limiting my vision. I knew this was my opportunity to go beyond thinking of this as a presentation—this was my

opportunity to work on my dream," Laura stated.

"I had a great mentor, Vernola Baskin, Director of Adult and Juvenile Justice Services for Cook County, TASC. Vernola encouraged me to follow my passion, and she helped me to dream big. During this difficult time of decision, I remembered one of my favorite books—La Vaca (The Cow) by Dr. Camilo Cruz. The author points out that the true enemy of success is not failure, but mediocrity. The cow represents everything that keeps us in our comfort

zone—excuses, pretexts, justifications and false beliefs. I kept thinking that I was placing limits on myself and making excuses because I was afraid to risk something new,” Laura said.

“So I stepped out, because nothing else seemed right,” she remembered. Thus, the seeds for The GRACE Center (Gate to Recovery and Alternative Community Education) were sown.

As Laura worked on her leadership presentation design, many interests, issues and struggles came to mind because of her professional and personal involvement in and commitment to the Latino community. “I am aware of the post-traumatic stress of Latinos who are in this country illegally. I am aware of the generational gaps between parents who do not speak English and children who do not want to speak Spanish. I am aware of the daily struggles parents have trying to communicate in schools, looking for work, and trying to access mental health services. The Latino community struggles with substance abuse and mental health issues and there are too few Spanish-speaking, direct service providers to meet these needs. I knew I had to do what I could to make a difference for the people facing these struggles,” she said. At this point, The GRACE Center became a reality.

“This was the right thing for Laura,” Ms. Baskin stated. “She actually was further along with her vision than she realized, because she was so clear about what needed to be done, and she was able to do it fairly quickly. I am so proud of her. I was always impressed that she was never concerned about what she would get out of the project; rather, she always focused on what she would give.”

Emma C. Redmond is a Chicago-based consultant who specializes in organizational planning and human resource development. She also develops and writes curricula, reports, and other documents related to addiction and prevention.

Four months after the Leadership Institute, Laura resigned her position with the single state substance abuse authority and began work fulltime as director of The GRACE Center. The Center provides culturally and linguistically appropriate substance abuse services to adults and adolescents. Other services include suicide prevention for adolescents and support for Latina women suffering from depression. The Center is licensed by the Illinois Division of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse. A workforce development component provides a 16-session training curriculum for new workers and those interested in entering the substance abuse field. Students who have completed this training include degreed social workers, volunteers, counselors preparing for certification, persons affected by familial substance abuse, and those in recovery. Internships in Latino substance abuse agencies are also offered to students by the Center. It is Laura’s hope to expand this placement component in the future.

Laura is living her dream professionally. A lot of hard work has gotten her to this point. Prior to the Center’s opening, Laura spent 16-hour days with such tasks as planning, grant writing, and preparation for licensure. When The GRACE Center first opened, the 16-hour days continued with implementation of the various programs. Although this sometimes left little time for her family, Laura said, “My family has been very supportive of my efforts. They are so proud of me and believe strongly in my work.”

Now, with the Center established and fully operational, Laura says she is trying for more of a balance between her professional and personal life. Given all the pressures and the long days would she do it all over again? “In a heartbeat,” Laura said. “I’ve never been happier, for I’ve found my calling.”