

Saluting Hispanic Heritage: Enriching the American Fabric and Way of Life

By James W. Horne Jr. CEO/President, United Way of Greater Union County
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In 2013, President Obama presented writer, Julia Alvarez, with the National Medal of the Arts. Although she was born in the United States, three-month old infant Julia migrated with her family back to their native land, the Dominican Republic in 1950. However, ten years later, the Alvarez family had to flee the country due to the oppressive dictatorship of the Rafael Trujillo. Without being able to speak any English upon her return to the United States, Julia Alvarez's rise to become one of the most prominent Latina writers of our time, connotes the soaring determination of the Latino spirit. And to the contributions she has made to our great nation.

Clearly, as we salute Hispanic Heritage Month (Sept. 15-Oct. 15) it is to recognize the significance of the Latino immigrant story as a culturally enriching one to this nation in every sector of society – from media and entertainment, such as the very funny Sofia Vergara, of the TV show Modern Family, to politics as Sonia Sotomayor, was the first Latina appointed to the United States Supreme Court by President Obama.

Generationally, there's no denying that the Latino community has made its mark, with 3.22 million Latino-owned businesses accounted for in this country, according to Geoscape. Closer to home, in Union County, New Jersey, nearly 15 percent of the Latino population owned businesses, according to the 2007 Census, while Latino women represented at 25.9 percent as business owners.

However, as the Latino population continues to grow, with New Jersey being one of 16 states with a Latino population of at least a half-million people, so does the problem of poverty in the Latino community. In New Jersey, 2 million children live in poverty and 29 percent of them are Latino.

As advocates for children and families, it is important to address the concerns of our community and look at poverty with an eye for creating opportunities - inclusively. We must be determined that as a community we can be inclusive in our approach to helping those who may speak another language or have cultural differences than our own. But the question is, how?

The simplest way is to gather everyone and talk. Present the data to community stakeholders who have the means to provide resources to address issues related to poverty, and also by including those who live the problem. With an open and honest forum, communities do amazing things to solve problems for their residents.

Most people don't want hand outs, but would rather have fair opportunities to the basics to a good quality of life, such as good health care, quality education for children and young adults, stable jobs that lead to family-sustaining wages, and access to affordable housing. These are things that allow families to care for their children with dignity.

Certainly, the vibrant culture of Hispanic Heritage reminds us of its uniqueness through the universal story of determination, resiliency and of talent that will not be denied that's woven into the American fabric and way of life. In our salute to Hispanic Heritage and all its colors, let's continue in our work together - one community with another - to ensure all people get to enjoy the best that life has to offer.

About James W. Horne, Jr.

James W. Horne, Jr., became President and CEO of United Way of Greater Union County (UWGUC) in 2005. During his tenure, James has designed and implemented significant organizational improvements in the areas of developing strong community partnerships, building and retaining board members and financial competence. He has worked hard to maintain the delicate balance of dedication to mission, the need for bold entrepreneurial initiatives, and the application of sound business management needed to run a successful nonprofit organization. His efforts have stabilized the organization both administratively and financially, with the overall revenue growth of over 40%.

Dedicated to the mission of family strengthening, James has helped to develop and implement a partnership between UWGUC, the Union County Department of Human Services, the State of New Jersey Department of Children and Families and the Nicholson Foundation to create the Union County Family Strengthening Network (UCFSN), a comprehensive system of family support and services in Union County. UCFSN is a unique public-private partnership designed to maximize and leverage all the available resources within the county on behalf of children and families.

James has over 15 years of experience as a United Way professional; most recently serving as President and CEO United Way of Pioneer Valley in Springfield, Massachusetts. Prior to that, he was Executive Vice President, Resource Development for United Way of Summit County in Akron, Ohio. He began his United Way career in his hometown of Bridgeport, CT with United Way of Eastern Fairfield County as a Campaign Division Manager. Before joining United Way, James spent 13 years with Sikorsky Aircraft as a Production and Inventory Analyst.

James lives in Bridgewater, New Jersey with his wife Kathryn and is the proud father of four children, Melissa, James III, LaToya Williams and Megan Somerville. He was former chair of the Union County Human Services Advisory Council and serves on the board of the Union County Workforce Investment Board, Mount Zion Community Development Corporation, and North Jersey Health Collaborative.