



ISABEL RUBIO: Social Advocate

How a middle-class girl from McComb, Mississippi with the last name Watkins became a crusader for Alabama's Latinos

BY MELANIE LEMAY

For a city of less than 15,000, McComb, Mississippi has had more than its share of notoriety. It's spawned such musicians as Bo Diddley and Britney Spears, and was one of the best-known voting rights battlegrounds in the early days of the Civil Rights Movement. McComb also produced Isabel Rubio, daughter of a Caucasian father and a third-generation Mexican-American mother. "I grew up in turbulent times," Rubio says. "I think that experience imprinted me with a destiny for social justice work."

A LARGE VOID

Moving to Birmingham as an adult, Rubio saw the same fallout from racial turmoil that she'd witnessed in Mississippi. Alabama's social agencies were struggling to reestablish their identities and rethink their missions as the state began to tolerate and even encourage racial and ethnic diversity. Like most social workers in the 1990s, Rubio found an increasing number of resources opening up for African-American families, even if those resources were sometimes mired in red tape.

"But for Latinos in Birmingham, there weren't as many resources," Rubio says. "The Latino community was growing, but no one was addressing their needs and their issues. While they shared some needs with the black community — medical and educational and housing issues — Latinos also faced language barriers

and immigration issues, and no one was doing much to help.”

It was an epiphany that would irrevocably alter Rubio’s life, both professionally and personally. “I like to think of it as a seed in my mind that grew into a program that affected everyone,” she says. The seed grew into iHICA!, the Hispanic Interest Coalition of Alabama.

Today’s iHICA! is a robust nonprofit, a kind of clearinghouse for local Latino community resources, transitional services, education and advocacy. And Rubio, at 43, is both proud and amazed at the organization she’s nurtured.

“I took such a winding road to get to this point,” she says, “though I was always oriented towards service.” Rubio was interested in so many fields; it was hard to choose just one. “I majored in history and thought I wanted to be a history teacher. Then I got interested in banking. For awhile I thought I might become an executive chef. It was only after I settled down and pursued social work that I felt a real sense of purpose.”

Rubio recognized the pressing needs facing Latinos in Alabama, but she faced an uphill battle when she looked into actually providing them. “I could see the limitations in the established agencies,” she says. “There were so many restrictions. It took so long to get anything done.”

The best way, she knew, would be to start an organization herself, dedicated solely to the needs of Latinos in Alabama. “But I knew nothing about starting a nonprofit, much less running one,” she says.

GRASSROOTS ORGANIZATION

Nevertheless, Rubio took the first steps towards creating an agency that would provide services and advocacy for Latinos in Alabama. With other early supporters, she defined some goals and found people willing to serve on a board of directors. Before long, the new agency caught the attention of La RaZa, a national Hispanic civil rights and advocacy group.

“La RaZa’s president came down to meet with our new board, and they talked about the kind of experienced people they’d need to get iHICA! off on the right foot,” Rubio says. “They especially wanted to find the right person to be executive director, and while I had the passion and commitment for the job, I didn’t have the experience to take iHICA! to the next level.”

La RaZa’s president disagreed. “Isabel,” he told her, “iHICA! already has the right person. The right person is you.”

The board agreed, and named Rubio executive director. With La RaZa’s help, and help from Alabama Power and the United Way, Rubio raised enough money to keep the new agency afloat for its first three years. She quit her job, giving up her insurance benefits and financial security, and opened iHICA!’s first small office.

“I had to learn how to run iHICA! from the ground up,” Rubio says. “I’d literally sit at my little desk and read book after book on nonprofit management.”

Even more difficult for Rubio was accepting herself as a viable director. “I had never really embraced my identity as a Latina,” she says. “Even though my mother was from Mexico, I’d grown up in McComb, Mississippi. My maiden name was Watkins. And I wasn’t bilingual.”

In the early days, before iHICA! had a bilingual staff, Rubio sometimes had to call on her Puerto Rican husband, Freddy, to interpret for her clients. “I met Freddy at about the time I was germinating this seed of an idea for iHICA!,” Rubio says. “He stood by me and watched and helped the agency grow, and as he did, our relationship grew as well.”

Today, Freddy and Isabel have two daughters, Amanda and Sofia. Freddy is a Birmingham attorney and resource for iHICA! on legal issues. From its first small office space at Southside Baptist Church, iHICA! has grown steadily and graduated to larger offices — first at Grace Episcopal Church and now into a double unit in a modern office building on West Valley Avenue.

The office space is distinctly Hispanic, with bright orange and red and yellow walls. It’s a happy place, bubbling over in English and Spanish and punctuated with laughter. Rubio works in a modest office near the front and includes her staff in setting goals and making decisions. “We sit at a round table when we have meetings,” she says, “because we like to work on things as a group.” With the recent downturn in the economy, Rubio says one of her top priorities for 2009 is retaining her staff.

“We all love our work here,” she says, “and we also take it very seriously. Being in this agency gives us the chance to respond to people’s needs in a more direct and timely way than if we had to go through traditional channels. We don’t have the rigidity and restrictions that you find in some

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justice can never be
attained.
~Hellen Keller

social service agencies, and that’s tremendously freeing. I always felt so confined in the traditional social work world. iHICA! allows us to address our clients’ individual needs, and yes — sometimes that means pushing other agencies to think less about restrictions and more about doing the right thing for the people they serve.”

MOVING FORWARD

Much of iHICA!’s support comes from Alabama corporations, Rubio says. “Smart companies recognize the direction demographics are going in this country,” she said. “The number of Latinos in the United States is rising, and as you could see in the last presidential election, the Latino vote is becoming more and more important.”

At the same time, she admits, the nation struggles with questions on immigration, and that struggle impacts public perception of the Hispanic community. “As immigration laws stand now,” Rubio says, “the system is broken beyond repair and must be reformed to meet the real needs of our country. And we have to remember that immigration is not the only issue for Latinos. By and large, immigrant families care about the same things we all do — safe communities, health care, education and access to justice.”

Rubio can’t imagine herself outside an advocacy role. “I want to enjoy my life,” she admits, “but I want to do meaningful things, too.”

Each of the detours she took along her road to iHICA! has brought valuable lessons, she says. “I really believe it all came together to lead me to this place.”

And what has she learned this year that will make 2009 even better? Rubio laughs. “We were talking today about our accomplishments in 2008,” she said, “and the staff says my Spanish is coming along nicely.”