

Cristina Gomez-Vidal HLI Class of 2004

HOPE Leadership Institute alumna Cristina Gomez-Vidal believes strengthening our middle class is vital to the growth of Latino communities. “As Latinas,” she says “we need to be developing great social experiments in our own communities that can be replicated across our nation.” She also feels we need initiatives that increase access to financial and technological tools, resources and education to advance Latino families.

Cristina learned an appreciation of the right to free speech and the freedom to express opinions from her Cuban father and Salvadorian mother who were both great lovers of literature, art, travel and especially politics. She feels that it is a gift to be able to participate in the political process, and the greater mistake is to not participate. Although she now appreciates playing chess and arguing religion with her parent’s politically activist friends at age 12, it was hard at the time to juggle a normal middle class American life with her friends and life at home with her parents.

Cristina currently works on policy issues, such as access to health care and those that affect the built environment, to help benefit the larger community. She also trains others on advocacy skills to help them identify ways that they can effectively impact public policy. Cristina takes a different approach to advocacy than most by incorporating a more personal side to the issues which is part of the reason behind her success. Through a series of workshops, she has been working with Latinas on embracing the spiritual aspects of life. She feels that, “when we embrace the meaning behind our everyday actions, it transcends the quality of life.”

Cristina’s describes her experience in the HOPE Leadership Institute as one of her most profound career and life influences. She says “as iron sharpens iron, my HOPE sisters have increased my own skills and influence.” She says, “I knew I wanted to make a difference, but through HOPE the difference I am able to make has been exponentially multiplied. I have been able to use my own unique skill sets and experience and fine tune them through the trainings and network that I am provided. I am encouraged not to fit into someone else’s mold of leadership, but to create my own brand of Latina leadership that is authentic to who I am and leaves a legacy for others. Through HOPE I not only feel confident to talk to decision makers at the table but to be at the table.”

Cristina continues her involvement with HOPE by training current HLI participants on teen pregnancy prevention advocacy during their session in the Central Valley. At this session the women discuss their own personal views on teen pregnancy and then learn how to see the issue “from both sides of the aisle.” Cristina says, “There is more that unites us than divides us and finding these common strategies can make our advocacy very successful. Cristina also helped to put on the first Teen Pregnancy Prevention workshop at HOPE’s Latina History Day 2007 that focused on healthy relationships and goal setting.

Cristina takes the issue of teen pregnancy prevention very personally and can relate to the women and students she speaks to in the workshops. She says she envisioned a career in Washington D.C. when she left home for UC Berkeley and thought she was never coming back to Madera where she was raised. Instead of heading to D.C., Cristina found herself driving across town, back in Madera, as an unwed mother of a newborn avoiding being seen using food stamps

and WIC vouchers. She remembers that she, “had a large dose of low self esteem, paralyzing depression and a good dose of folly.”

During the next decade, Cristina started working with women through a weight loss program providing counseling and trainings. During that time, she says, “I came to realize how universal some of our struggles are with low self esteem, competing priorities, and putting off realizing our goals.

Cristina was then hired by Camarena Health Centers, Inc. through a California Wellness Foundation initiative to prevent teen pregnancy and in a few years she was running the \$1.9 million dollar initiative in the community. The program provided assistance and other resources to individuals and organizations to expand and enhance their work with teens and their families. Currently, Cristina has developed her own consulting company, Nice Little Idea Company where she coaches and trains individuals and organizations to achieve their goals for improving the lives of others. She also trains for National Community Development Institute on advocacy.

Cristina says her greatest accomplishments to date are those that she has enabled others to do; programs that introduce school children to college, not just once, but throughout the school year, peer helper programs in middle schools, churches providing programming to prevent teen pregnancy, and even adding a bus stop for a low income housing unit. She says, “I love when someone discovers their own strength and value. It’s like seeing them catch a glimpse of themselves in God’s mirror.”

Cristina currently serves on the Sherman Charter School Board, the Madera Vision Steering Committee (appointed by the City of Madera) and the Physician Assistant Committee for the State of California (appointed by the Senate). She uses her Latina lens to weigh the impact of her decisions on our communities. She feels that, “it is important to use what influence we have to educate others on the impact that decisions and policies will have on Latinas. It benefits all of us to be informed.”

