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Alumni Profile

Beth Rogers Thompson

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Gale Castillo '73

Advocate for Latinos

When Gale Castillo '73 entered Linfield, she saw few people who looked like her – only a handful of Latino students. Even fewer students had babies and husbands.

Married at 16 and a mother at 17, Castillo had been accepted at the University of California at Berkeley. But a family friend whose children attended Linfield suggested that she and her then-husband, Carlos Mejia, check out the college. “We toured the campus and liked the area, although it was kind of a culture shock coming from Oakland, Calif., so we decided we would move to Oregon and get off on our own.”

Despite its lack of diversity at the time – “The only diversity was the Hawaiian football players,” Castillo says – the young couple found Linfield welcoming. “The staff, people in admissions, made an effort to help us settle in,” she says. “They helped us find housing and employment.”

Working at the *News-Register* newspaper, changing diapers, canning and sewing, in addition to studying, left little time to socialize or get involved in campus activities, she says. Son Roberto Mejia, now 38, was one of the first children enrolled at the Linfield Pre-Kindergarten. Castillo was a student representative on its Board of Directors.

She fondly remembers psychology professor Marcelle Robinson, who became a strong role model for Castillo. “I’m the first in my family, like many others, to attend college, so having someone like her to look up to really made a difference,” she says.

Overall, Castillo found Linfield “a wonderful experience and a wonderful introduction to Oregon. My husband went back to California, and I stayed.”

Castillo remarried in 1975. She and husband Jerry Brown live in Portland and own Cascade Centers Inc., one of the largest private companies in the United States that provide employee assistance program (EAP) services, staff development and executive coaching.

Castillo also is president and a founding member of the Hispanic Metropolitan Chamber (HMC). Established in 1994, it now has 800 members. It provides technical assistance to small businesses, a Latino Leadership training program, an annual trade show and numerous networking events.

HMC also offers college scholarships for Latino students statewide. Participating colleges provide matching funds for students, and recipients are selected based on academic achievements, extracurricular activities in the community and a written essay. Six Linfield students



Gale Castillo '73 with Tomi Lesh '10, a nursing major from North Bend, who is also a recipient of a scholarship from the Hispanic Metropolitan Chamber.

from both the McMinnville and Portland Campuses are among the current recipients, including Tomi Lesh '10, a nursing major from North Bend who one day hopes to get her nurse practitioner license.

“As a first-generation college student, it was difficult for me to guide my way to college,” Lesh says. “I hope to give back the way many Linfield alumni and the Metropolitan Chamber members have. It inspires me to do the same one day.”

Castillo has seen first hand the importance of partnering with institutions to support Latino students.

“Education is the avenue for economic opportunity for every citizen in the U.S.,” she says. “Our whole idea is to support the Latino community – students and small Latino businesses. The ethic here is to give back and be supportive for others coming behind us.”

Castillo’s leadership and service have drawn regional and national kudos. Her latest was in January, when she was selected as one of 22 Latinas in the U.S. to participate in the National Hispana Leadership Institute. ■

– Beth Rogers Thompson