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EXECUTIVE PROFILE

Out of childhood intolerance, a beacon for Latino youth

After 20 years, Oliver-Dávila is still in her dream job.

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Title: Executive Director, Sociedad Latina**Age:** 51**Education:** Bachelor's degree in political science, Emmanuel College, 1992; master's degree in policy, urban environmental program, Tufts University, 2013**Residence:** Roslindale

GARY HIGGINS

Alexandra Oliver-Dávila, Executive Director of Sociedad Latina, has channeled her energy and passion into creating a supportive community for Latino youth where she values their input and believes in their ability to create positive social change.

Born in New York, to Argentine and Nicaraguan parents, Alexandra Oliver-Dávila was immersed in Latin American culture early on. She lived in Mexico for five years and Argentina for two before returning to New York. By sixth grade, her parents long divorced, she, her mother and two brothers moved to Brookline.

Or just barely; it was right on the West Roxbury line. Still, Oliver-Dávila says, it would have been easy for people to assume the family was doing just fine: They lived in a single-family house, and she attended private school. But outward appearances were deceiving. The house was owned by a family friend who lowered the rent to make it affordable, and Oliver-Dávila was a scholarship student at the Brimmer and May School.

She now wonders how her mother, [Elana Oliver](#), managed to make ends meet on a receptionist's salary, especially after enrolling as an older college student (in sports journalism, of all things).

"We were scraping by," Oliver-Dávila says. "My mother never showed the stress she was under. What we didn't have in resources, she made up for with love."

The neighborhood was not so loving. Unlike in New York or Latin America, there were few who looked like her or spoke her language, Oliver-Dávila says, or cared to hear it.

"I had not encountered the racism in New York that I experienced here," she says, adding that she was frequently spat upon. "I learned early on not say that I was Latina or that I spoke Spanish."

After high school, Oliver-Dávila attended University of Massachusetts-Amherst, but dropped out with the notion that she didn't need a college degree. A few months working at a bank convinced her otherwise, and she enrolled at Emmanuel College, her mother's alma mater, where [Elana Oliver](#) had been nudging her to go. That decision, Oliver-Dávila says, was "hard for a daughter to say, but they're words every mother wants to hear: 'My mother was right!'"

Oliver-Dávila went on to complete her bachelor's in political science at Emmanuel, followed by a masters in public policy from Tufts.

At 24, she joined Jamaica Plain's Hyde Square Task Force as a community organizer, helping residents take back parks that had become hot spots for drug dealing. But she found her true calling in an earlier internship with Mission Possible, a summer camp in Mission Hill started by state Rep. [Kevin Fitzgerald](#). The Hyde Square organization allowed her to shift gears.

“I worked predominantly with Latino youth. Just seeing the pride they had in who they were and speaking their language, and seeing so many families who were proud of their heritage ... was healing for me,” she says. “I began to realize I had wasted all this time being in this place of shame. I realized I wanted a job where I could create a place where other young people would never feel the way I felt growing up.”

That led to her taking a job with Sociedad Latina, becoming its executive director in 1999. “People asked me what I wanted when I grew up. I said, ‘I want to be the director,’ and here I am, 20 years later.”

With a \$2.1 million budget, the organization works with youth from middle school through college and beyond, focusing on workforce development, civic engagement, academic support, and arts and culture. If that sounds like agency boilerplate, it may be better described in human terms, such as in one of the success stories she points to: “There was a young man I worked with when he was 13,” she recounts. “When he was older, he became homeless. I took him in, and he lived with me for two or three years. He got his associates, now he’s getting his bachelor’s. He just moved into his own apartment with his girlfriend. He lost his mom at 11 and lived with dad, who worked three jobs. I could not just sit back and watch that happen. He’s like a son to me, really.”

Then there’s her 10-year-old natural daughter, a focus of Oliver-Dávila’s few hours of leisure time away from the office and the many boards she serves on. Among them are Emmanuel College, the Boston School Committee and the Anna B Stearns Foundation.

None of this would have been possible without mentors like Rep. Fitzgerald, she says, and her mother — despite the difficulties Oliver-Dávila experienced growing up.

“I was followed home, fights,” she repeats, explaining her mother couldn’t fully be there for her because she didn’t tell her what was happening, out of fear of further repercussions from her peers. But then again, she did a good job. Because here I am, right?”