

The DreamBuilder Program, Jacksonville Women’s Business Center

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By Lorrie DeFrank

For women business owners, having a dream doesn’t necessarily mean getting a new enterprise off the ground. Accomplished women dream, too—about such aspirations as international relations, building docks, decorating cakes and throwing parties. They all take leaps of faith to help them start, change or grow.



From left, Maribel Hernandez, Pegine Echevarria and Maria Montoya-Leonard

Late last year when the Jacksonville Women’s Business Center offered its inaugural DreamBuilder Program to area women, Director Pat Blanchard knew who to tap to facilitate it. Pegine Echevarria is living her dream. A member of a girl gang as a teen in the Bronx, she is now an international motivational speaker, largely through the help of the JWBC. Six women signed up for the program. Three stuck with it. The powerful foursome forged professional and personal bonds they will continue to use to support each other throughout their careers.

A tool of the U.S. Small Business Administration, DreamBuilder is a business skills training and certification program for women interested in starting or growing a business. Curriculum topics include planning, marketing, pricing, management and accounting. In addition to taking individual online classes, participants meet weekly for four months with mentors and peers to discuss what they are learning and their personal goals. The program is offered in English and Spanish.



Maria Powers

Echevarria facilitated the sessions in Spanish for her Hispanic mentees, even though all of them speak English, as well. Although she is Puerto Rican, she grew up mostly speaking English but learned Spanish from living for several years in Spain where she owned a business. In addition to being a dynamic speaker, Echevarria, CEO of Team Pegine, Inc., excels in consulting, coaching and career development, specializing in diverse markets. She was JWBC’s second client when it started in 2004 and took most of its courses before giving back as a mentor for many of the same programs. Founder of its Women of Color Initiative, she served on JWBC’s advisory board. Of the 58 people inducted into the prestigious Motivational Speakers Hall of Fame, she is the only one who conducts programs in English and Spanish on leadership, business and sales. She is one of eight women and the only Hispanic woman.

Program participants are: Maribel Hernandez, president and CEO of Celebrate!; Maria Montoya-Leonard, a Latin America marketing and advertising consultant; and Maria Powers, owner of Powers Services and Repairs, Inc. They agree that DreamBuilder is a challenging and thorough program that provides the basic information they needed to pursue their ambitions. But it was Echevarria who gave them the encouragement to make their dreams come true. The program includes an initial analysis that helps participants clarify their expectations. “It’s really about the why,” Echevarria said. “Running a business is not as easy as it sounds. You need a strong business plan.”

“The lessons walk you at a micro level through each portion of a business plan. You go as slow or fast as you want. But the program also allows the element of having an actual live person who is a motivator and a coach,” Hernandez said. “Pegine did a great job of allowing us to establish relationships so we could

have candid conversations with honest and constructive feedback. To me, that was more valuable than the lessons.”

“Women who say they don’t have time (to pursue their dreams) may be afraid to get out of their box and comfort zone,” Montoya-Leonard said. “I am really grateful to this group because we learned a lot from each other. Everyone wanted to collaborate and share, not compete. Pegine really cares about us. This changed my life.”

Powers concurred that being part of a group of women struggling with the same challenges made her feel less alone and more confident. “Pegine is very upbeat and she makes you feel like you can do anything,” she said.

Echevarria believes conducting the sessions in the women’s native language and embracing their cultures, particularly the importance of family to Latinos, helped build trust and understanding.

Planes to parties

Coincidentally, Hernandez was the first person in Jacksonville to hire Echevarria—for a Super Bowl-related event in 2005—when she worked for the Jacksonville Aviation Authority as chief operating officer, at the time the highest ranking Hispanic in local government. She had served on the First Coast Hispanic Chamber of Commerce Board for four years, two as president. In transition from a later job in multi-cultural marketing for Florida Blue, she reached out to local resources that support women-owned businesses to pursue her dream of planning parties and decorating cakes.

“You go to work every day, you provide for your family, but there’s got to be more to our legacy and meaning in life. Running airports is not what I want my tombstone to say,” she said. “DreamBuilder is not only well-structured, it’s finding what is right for you.”

Hernandez credits the program with helping her focus her business she calls Celebrate! to themed parties for children ages 3 to 9 and making custom cakes and cupcakes. Until she can afford to hire someone to play the parts, she even portrays characters such as Elena of Avalor, Dora the Explorer, Pirate, Ice Princess and the Arabian Princess Jasmine. With the help of her husband, a U.S. Navy veteran; daughter, a cake designer; and son, a graphic designer, the party business is a family affair.

Raised in New Jersey, Hernandez is a Puerto Rican who is fluent in English and Spanish. “I found real value in being able to be brutally honest in ways that were constructive,” she said of her DreamBuilder group’s camaraderie and understanding.

“We created a safe environment where we could discuss the complexities of business, family and balancing it all,” Echevarria said. “In the Hispanic culture family is critically important. Family supports you.”

International success

You know your company has far reaching interests when the phone number on your business card includes its international code, like Montoya-Leonard’s. She was a successful businesswoman for more than 20 years in her native Colombia with her own advertising agency, Leonard & Montoya. She worked with international companies that included IFC World Bank and major corporations. After she moved to the U.S. with her American husband several years ago she was apprehensive about starting her own business here, despite her husband’s encouragement and her vast experience. Then Echevarria emailed to invite her to DreamBuilder.

“She opened the box. She said you need to do this now,” said Montoya-Leonard, whose clients include the U.S. Navy. “Because of Pegine I am working a lot. I have my own consulting business and do marketing and public relations, and I consult with another company in sales and marketing. Everything I discovered was through this course.”

Initially concerned about language barriers and child care, Montoya-Leonard was able to gain confidence in communicating in English with global clients and arrange with her husband a situation where they could still look after their children.

“She teaches the culture and language, and she teaches executives how to market,” said Hernandez of her friend’s multi-cultural talents. “That is a booming industry now, and she is perfect.”

“There has been a huge shift in business. Hispanics have buying power. Spanish is the second most spoken language in the United States of America, according to the U.S. Census Bureau,” Echevarria said. “You have to be able to speak English and Spanish.”

“My dream has come true,” Montoya-Leonard said.

Building confidence

For Powers, meeting Echevarria was serendipitous.

Powers, from Nicaragua, was visiting her mother in Miami in 2000 when she met her future husband. Eight months later they were married and living in Jacksonville, where they soon started a handyman business. For the next 10 years they worked throughout the region with a property management firm in Orlando. After that company went with another vendor, Powers became a code enforcement officer for the City of Jacksonville.

As part of a Leadership Jacksonville project, Echevarria had to take a tour of the city and chose code enforcement. Powers was her driver. “She was taking me all over Springfield educating me. She was so detailed,” said Echevarria, who later told Powers about DreamBuilder. “She was looking for a connection with other Hispanic women who had run businesses.”

“I didn’t want to quit my job. She said go for it,” Powers said.

“Toward the end of the program she came in one day and said ‘I’m letting you all know I quit and am going back into business’,” Echevarria said. “Maria knows construction very well.”

Powers, who is working on her marine contractor’s license, took out a personal loan to purchase a barge. She believes Powers Services and Repairs may be the only Hispanic-owned, woman-owned construction firm that has a barge with access to the waterfront in Northeast Florida.

In addition to preparing proposals and ordering material, Powers, who has three children, often works side-by-side with her husband and employees from a labor pool to build and install docks. Having limited finances and marketing, after Hurricane Matthew hit the area last fall the couple Googled addresses on the water and followed up with postcards and phone calls to increase business.

“These women are the future of Jacksonville, especially in the business community,” Echevarria said.

For more information about the DreamBuilder program, contact the JWBC at 904.366.6640 or jwbc@myjaxchamber.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Lorrie DeFrank is a freelance writer whose stories have appeared in newspapers and magazines in Pennsylvania and Florida. She was a reporter and managing editor for a daily newspaper in Pennsylvania. Subsequent positions with the City of Jacksonville and University of Florida College of Medicine-Jacksonville included writing columns, profiles and other stories for city and UF publications and websites. Lorrie has been a volunteer writer for Jacksonville Women's Business Center since 2008.