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Activist Gonzalez: Middle Class, Perhaps, But Committed Fighter

"I hope you don't label me as the rising middle class professional," says

Maria Gonzalez Borretto. She wears a beige velour sweater, a cotton striped shirt in earth colors, a linen off-white skirt and black pumps. The clothes are nicely cut.

"Middle class," she says, "has a lot of negative connotations I don't want to be associated with. For example, being bourgeois," she pauses, searching for a better explanation. "It detaches you from the people who you work with. I don't want to be separated from my community," she says.

But by the very stature of her \$21,500 a year position as director of the Hispanic Health Council it easily can be argued she is both middle class and professional.

Her close friends see it from another perspective.

"She is a very poor Puerto Rican woman committed to her community, engaged to her community, and who has a lot of convictions for her community," says Hispanic activist Eugenio Caro, who works for Gonzalez as research director of the health council she founded.

"She could be making \$85,000 elsewhere if she wanted," Caro adds.

Gonzalez has rejected many job offers from area hospitals and businesses, instead choosing to stay in the modest Hartford headquarters of her health council at 99 Main St. The council's work is mostly community health research, and its \$250,000 budget is funded largely by the National Institute of Mental Health.

Gonzalez' desk is plain and cluttered. She sits on an inexpensive office chair. The wooden floor is worn and the white walls of her office are sparsely decorated. But three posters stand out: a Puerto Rican sunset; another with the words "Flotara Sola" — it shall fly alone — emblazoned beneath the Puerto Rican flag and expressing the hope for island independence, and a drawing of a raccoon floating on a rubber tube, next to a small yellow duck.

Taking a moment to take it easy is being a friend to yourself," says the last poster. It was a gift from a student with a handwritten note in Spanish: "For Maria... to remind her that life is not all work."



Maria Gonzalez in the Hispanic Health Council Offices

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sterilized. When she talks about it her wouldn't get better, Gonzalez says.

Gonzalez at first never had the chance to float through life, and now she chooses not to. Like other successful area Puerto Ricans such as John Soto, an Orange businessman, she struggled and scratched and suffered to succeed.

She was born in Puerto Rico, a product of a broken marriage, and grew up in the slums of New York's Lower East Side. She married at age 17, had both her daughters by 18, was divorced at 22, and did not complete her undergraduate education until last spring at New Hampshire College.

Today, she finds an easy comparison with Soto. "We were aggressive," she says. "We are hustlers. We hustled for whatever we got. The fact is this system does allow some unprivileged people to succeed. But it only lets a few into the door. It does not allow for many aggressive people."

She pauses to remember more. Her small brown eyes, occasionally intense, dart back and forth behind big glasses. Her eyes sometimes are the only barometers of emotion.

She is articulate in English and Spanish. Her face is small with angular features, her hair short, black and curly. Her right hand, with fingers long and slender for her 5-foot, 4-inch frame, holds her chin.

Those fingers played violin for nine years. She loved Haydn's music, partly because he was a poor man. But she stopped playing in her senior year in high school after she became pregnant.

A student when she dropped out, she forfeited potential scholarships to music and fashion schools.

"I had to grow up faster because of my hardships as a kid," Gonzalez says. "I never had a childhood. I was raising my sister at 9. I went to work at a younger age than others."

"I never learned to ride a bike. I still haven't to this day."

Not being able to sit on two wheels probably is one of Gonzalez's few failures.

Her resume is five pages long. Within six years of moving to Hartford in 1969, she was named president of La Casa de Puerto Rico, a Hispanic advocacy agency that has produced the only comprehensive report to date on the education of Connecticut's Spanish-speaking residents. She is on the board of directors of Hartford Process, a corporate-funded think-tank.

Her health council has completed a year-long survey in Hartford. One of the study's first reports showed 53 percent of Hispanic women in two low-income neighborhoods had been had been

anger snows in her glaring eyes.

But her voice is calm and easy. Just outside her office hangs another poster: of Che Guevara, the late revolutionary and confidant of Cuba's Fidel Castro. Gonzalez says she admires the Cuban dictator for his philosophy and accomplishments. Her ideology, however, is hard to define.

"My problem is I don't know another system other than this one," she says. "In this system, the poor lose. I don't like that. I want to change the system."

"I would like to see the government, along with the private sector, become responsible for all basic necessities: housing, education, health, employment and food. I have a difficult time understanding why people go hungry."

She has worked at the Community Renewal Team, an anti-poverty agency in Hartford, and the Clay Hill Recreation Center as well as with other neighborhood organizations. But it was working for two city hospitals that convinced Gonzalez the poor needed health advocates.

The first job was in 1970 as a nurses' aide at St. Francis Hospital and Medical Center's emergency room. It was a short, bitter affair. Gonzalez says she was one of two minority employees. She was not allowed to chat during free minutes, she says, or to drink coffee inside the emergency room as the nurses and doctors were.

"I was treated very, very poorly," she says. "I didn't know why. I didn't like it. I wanted out."

Three years later, she joined Hartford Hospital as an employee development specialist, a liaison between the hospital administration, staff and entry level employees. After four years, she left. She worked a year for the city's Board of Education then started the health council with her perceptions of Hartford Hospital's shortcomings partly in mind.

"I was exposed to the hospital top to bottom," she says. "It has its own community, its own culture and its own language. I learned it."

"I saw many things such as the staff needs for bilingual persons... some cases of discrimination... but those weren't the outstanding things. The outstanding things were the things they missed."

For example, she says, the hospital staff would treat a Puerto Rican diabetic patient without regard for the patient's economic level or cultural background. The treatment would be expensive or the diet foreign.

"The end result was this person wouldn't follow the treatment" and

the staff was as frustrated as the patients."

Hartford Hospital spokesman James Battaglio says those kinds of situations may have occurred in the past but because of people such as Gonzalez, the hospital has become more aware of cultural differences among its patients. For example, because of Gonzalez's quiet negotiations, Hispanic patients now are allowed to keep religious medallions in the pockets of their gowns when they undergo surgery.

"The administration," he says, "recognizes her as a good person who is in effect a friend of the hospital."

Maria Gonzalez seems to be without detractors. It is hard to find anyone who criticizes her.

"She has no enemies," says school board member Maria Sanchez.

"She doesn't shoot from the hip; she's quite thorough" says Battaglio.

"She clearly belongs inside the system talking and persuading," says Hartford lawyer Lewis B. Rome.

"She is a woman of flexibility, but also a woman of views that she never fails to express," says retired Aetna Life and Casualty Chairman Olcott D. Smith.

She is a woman who allows others to disagree but not to dominate. Many things in life, she says, exert too much control over people, including the welfare system, drugs, political machines or domineering parents. She married young partly to escape her step-father.

"I resent control," Gonzalez says. "I have fought all my life against it. We were on public assistance when I was a kid. I hated it but we needed it."

"Welfare controls people. Unemployment controls people. Social Security controls people. I'm not saying we should take them away, but they do regulate people's lives."

For example, she adds, people aren't permitted to continue education after high school if they are on welfare.

"There are no roles inside those institutions which allow you to be independent," Gonzalez says. "You are treated as a child, looked upon as a child. After a while, you think you are a child."

Gonzalez refuses to dominate people, whether it be her 11-year-old and 12-year-old daughters or her staff at meetings.

"Sometimes it is hard to know she is the boss," health council researcher Virgilio Escalante says.

"Nevertheless," her associate, Caro, says, "when Maria has to make a decision, she does and she is very firm about it. And she usually makes the right one."