

Diversity/Careers in Engineering & Information Technology

Technical Workforce and Supplier Diversity

Focus on diversity

Hispanics in IT are on the cutting edge of technology

"We all face challenges, but if you set your mind on a goal, there are ways around obstacles." – Dr Ester Gonzalez, the PhD Project

*By Dan Margherita
Senior Contributing Editor*



Dr Ester
Gonzalez.

Dr Ester Gonzalez: graduate of the PhD Project and assistant professor at Cal State

"We all face challenges," says Dr Ester Gonzalez, "but if you set your mind on a goal, there are ways around obstacles. It may not be a smooth road, but it can happen."

Gonzalez is in a tenure-track position as an assistant professor of information systems at California State University-Fullerton. After a career spent largely in government and nonprofit administration, she is part of the PhD Project Information Systems Doctoral Student Association (ISDSA, www.phdproject.org).

She grew up in Uvalde, TX, not far from the Mexican border. Computers and programming were just becoming popular when she was in high school in the late 80s. "The school offered one course," she says. "I was intrigued and joined the class. There were eight or ten of us and only two females."

The class sparked Gonzalez's interest and she considered CS as her college major. She enrolled at Baylor University (Waco, TX) after graduating from high school in 1989, but faced constant struggles and dropped out after her first semester. "The coursework was

challenging but there were other issues,” she recalls. “My parents were Mexican immigrants who didn’t see the need for a young woman to go to school. There wasn’t a big support system at home.”

Within a year, Gonzalez had married, divorced after six months, and had a child. In the spring of 1991 she enrolled at Southwest Texas Junior College in Uvalde and earned an AAS in data processing and programming in 1992.

“I pushed myself and got the degree in less than two years,” she explains. “I was a single mom who needed to support her son. In 1992, I got a job with the Texas Department of Health. It was a great opportunity for me and they had great benefits!”

Gonzalez was an administrative assistant for the dental program and her abilities caught the attention of the regional director. “He got me involved in projects at our regional sites that made good use of my programming skills,” she says. “Even though I had not been hired as a tech person, I started getting lots of calls for troubleshooting. I really enjoyed it because it kept my skills growing.”

She was working with social workers, using her technical skills to help them serve their clients and manage their caseloads. “Every six months I got promoted but after a couple of years I realized that I had reached the top of what I could do there,” she says.

Her director encouraged her to go back to school. “I found out that my AAS degree was lacking in some areas, like English, so I went back to the junior college to pick up those courses,” she says. In 1996 she entered Our Lady of the Lake University in San Antonio, TX.

Gonzalez earned her BBA with a concentration in electronic commerce in 1998. As her academic credentials expanded, so did her family. By this time, she had remarried and had two more children.

She joined Sierra Industries, a privately held jet aviation company in Uvalde. Although hired initially for her business skills, Gonzalez again found herself involved in moving company processes from manual to computerized administration.

After only a few months, she learned that the Community Council of Southwest Texas in Uvalde was opening a charter school and was looking for a math teacher. Gonzalez had done tutoring in college and saw this as an opportunity to use that experience and have more time to spend with her children, particularly in the summer.

She started at the school in August 1998. “We had about 180 students in fifth through

ninth grades and were pretty much starting from scratch,” she says. “In addition to teaching, I was the business manager. And I was writing grants to help us obtain a computer lab.”

By the following May she was named principal. She stayed until 2000. “I was having my fourth child and while I was on maternity leave, a former instructor at Southwest Texas Junior College (Uvalde) called me about an opening they had for a substitute professor to teach courses in administrative IT and computer information systems.”

She accepted the temporary job and was offered a position as lead instructor for administrative IT when the professor didn’t return. In 2007, Gonzalez was ready for the next level and decided to pursue grad school. “It was a difficult decision,” she admits. “The idea was to get my masters and return to Southwest.”

So, almost twenty years after she dropped out of Baylor, Gonzalez returned there and earned her masters in 2008 and her PhD in 2012, both in information systems. Again, she pushed herself to earn the masters in less than two years, and the toll on her marriage was enormous. She and her husband divorced, leaving her a single mom with four children.

“My kids were lights in a very dark time for me,” she says. “They took part-time jobs and made other sacrifices to help me. They said, ‘You’re so close. You can’t stop now.’”

Gonzalez had heard about the PhD Project and its Information Systems Doctoral Student Association in 2009. The Montvale, NJ-based organization helps Hispanic Americans, African Americans and Native Americans attain their business PhDs and become business professors, mentoring the next generation. It enjoys funding support from many corporations, foundations and organizations including Aerotek, TEKsystems, Microsoft, the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago, the KPMG Foundation and Merck.

“Partnering with organizations like the PhD Project is critical to the success of corporate America,” says Larin Limones-Nelson, manager of diversity and inclusion at TEKsystems (Wayne, PA). “If we don’t have professors out there in front of the classroom who mirror what our organizations and communities look like, we are not going to have the future pipeline of Hispanic talent to work for us in corporate America.”

Gonzalez says that the ISDSA connects PhD students with each other and shows them they are not alone. “It opens a door that allows students to get to know the senior faculty. When you’re in a PhD program, you read articles and the experts seem like unreachable celebrities in the IT world, but as a part of ISDSA, you can meet them one-

on-one. They're very approachable. They know what you're going through because they went through it themselves."

As Gonzalez was receiving her PhD in 2012, she met someone from Washington State University-Pullman, who told her about an opening for a visiting assistant professor at the school. "I wanted to be acquainted with more of a research school and I jumped at the chance," she says. "It was a great benefit to my professional growth." She moved to a similar position at Cal State in the fall of 2012, and is now an assistant professor on a tenure track.

The year before she received her PhD, Gonzalez and her husband reconciled and remarried. "Our family is together, and I am Dr Gonzalez," she says with a smile.