

SBS IN THE NEWS



Latina salons weather recession beautifully

By Rebecca Harshbarger
Tuesday, December 15, 2009

Latina beauty salons throughout the United States are providing an employment lifeline to a group of female workers who have been badly hurt by the recession. One owner in Queens, N.Y., hopes to add English classes to her new cosmology school.

Here in Woodside, Queens, Carmen Ledesma employs nine women in her Parisien Beauty Salon, a business she started 16 years ago on Roosevelt Avenue after moving to the United States from Paraguay.

For a mother of three with limited English skills, it turned out to be a good way to make an income, something the New York mayor's office noted in early October at a press conference about the city's efforts to support immigrant-owned businesses in New York, which hosts an estimated 130,000 Latino-owned businesses.

At the City University of New York's Graduate Center, city officials asked Ledesma to precede Mayor Michael Bloomberg in the press conference's speaker lineup to describe how she expanded her business, going from an employee at one salon to starting her own small salon. She has since added a spa and opened a cosmology school, a storefront with large glass windows in a multistory building, which she created with help from a government-supported small business initiative.

"Since I opened the door to my salon, many immigrant women have seen that they can open their own business," said Ledesma. "I have achieved one of my dreams, and sent three children to college."

The Center for Women's Business Research, based in McLean, Va., says Latinas owned over 700,000 businesses nationwide in 2007 and generated about \$46 billion in sales. Between 1993 and 2006, the number of Latina-owned businesses more than doubled.

Overall, female-owned companies employ 16 percent of the U.S. work force and contribute \$3 trillion to the almost \$14 trillion U.S. economy, according to the center.

Small business aid benefits women

"I don't know the statistics, but I would suspect that you would be shocked by how many immigrants' small businesses are run by women," Bloomberg said at the press conference in response to a question by Women's eNews. "If you help out small businesses, you will do an awful lot for women. We saw that with Carmen and her beauty salon."

The Latino work force has been badly hurt by the recession, according to a February 2009 report by the Washington-based Pew Hispanic Center. Between 2007 and 2008, the jobless rate for immigrant Latinos rose to 8 percent from around 5 percent and for U.S.-born Latinos it rose to 9.5 percent from 6.7 percent.

A slowdown in the construction industry has caused much grief for Latino households. In Woodside, along Roosevelt Avenue, near Ledesma's salon, day laborers who used to find work readily in the mornings by waiting near the subway can now go weeks without a day of construction or restaurant work, according to interviews by Women's eNews.

Even before the recession, two years ago, Latinas were still twice as likely as non-Hispanic women to live in poverty, according to the Pew Hispanic Center.

At this same time, however, the fastest growing segment in small businesses is Latina-owned companies, according to the U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, a nongovernmental organization based in Washington, D.C.

Among these small businesses, beauty salons have proven resilient because they are so popular in many Latino communities, often acting as a social hub.

Latinas are more likely than any other social group in the United States to visit hair salons and cosmetic counters, and spend more on cosmetic products overall than other groups of women, according to Yankelovich Partners, a consumer research company in Chapel Hill, N.C.

School helps other Latinas

Ledesma's business is small, earning about a \$100,000 a year, and she receives about 20 customers daily.

In a phone interview, she said that she hopes her cosmology school can help other Latinas get a foothold in the business world by starting their own salons in the city.

"I'm really proud to open a school, and I hope that I can help other women start their own projects and businesses," she said.

NYC Business Solutions, a city-funded program, counseled Ledesma on accessing business credit from her bank, and despite the tight credit market, she took out a loan to start the school.

Once her school, which opened last month, is more settled, she also hopes to use city aid to start offering English classes to her workers through the city's English as a Second Language program.

"I dream of having English classes, so my workers don't have to spend a decade like me without knowing English," she said.

At the press conference, Bloomberg said the city would commit \$3 million to provide 5,000 more free classes in English as a Second Language, adding to the 50,000 free classes now available to immigrant New Yorkers.

In June, the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs teamed up with New York City's Department of Small Business Services to announce other measures designed to help Latino-owned small businesses in the recession.

In addition to promising to launch a new NYC Business Solutions office in Washington Heights, a predominantly Latino neighborhood in upper Manhattan, the city also staged a financing fair for Latino businesses in August 2009, where over a 100 Latino business owners were matched with lenders. The city also conducted a seminar to train Latino entrepreneurs about publicly-available services.

Texas salon fulfills dream

Louise Benavidez, a 57-year-old resident of Galveston, Texas, is another proud owner of a beauty salon, something she dreamed about as a child.

The oldest of six, she used to cut the hair of four of her sisters. Her mother died when she was 10.

"Before she died, she always used to take me to the beauty salon," Benavidez said. "Beauty salons definitely empower Latinas by giving them the opportunity to be owners."

She opened Lulu's, a salon that now employs 14 women, over 30 years ago.

Located in a town badly hit by Hurricane Ike last year, Lulu's has seen some lulls.

Benavidez uses these quiet moments to educate her employees, mostly Latino, with skill-building classes on topics that range from customer service to industry standards for hair perms, cutting and coloring.

Being part of the Professional Beauty Association, a nonprofit trade association based in Scottsdale, Ariz., has also helped Benavidez and her salon connect with other salon owners for mentoring, networking and resource guides on compensation and cosmetic regulations, among others.

"This is an industry that has really made it through the recession," said Benavidez, "because you make people feel and look good."