

— LIFESTYLE —

Latinas And Power A Star-Studded Event



Carmen Yulín Cruz, Marilyn Alverio, Ana Navarro

Bill Sarno/CTLatinoNews.com

In the days and weeks after Hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico, Carmen Yulín Cruz, the mayor of San Juan, became the face and voice of an island engulfed in a massive humanitarian crisis and crying for help.

The images of Yulín wading through waist-deep water to help the storm’s victims and her relentless and often emotional prodding of the Trump administration and the international community to do more for the 3.5 million Puerto Ricans trying to subsist under dire conditions and the gratitude of millions of Puerto Ricans living on the mainland.

Last week, Yulín was in Hartford to accept the Latina Champions Award at the Latinas and Power Symposium, which was celebrating its 15th or quinceañera year, at the Hilton hotel.

The presence of Yulín and keynote speaker political columnist Ana Navarro, attracted a sold-out capacity crowd of 500 professional Latinas at various stages of their careers, as well as students.

Among those clearly impressed by the size of the turnout and its exuberance was Navarro, a nationally recognized Latino media personality, who had come to Hartford from her home in Miami, Florida.

“I was surprised to find so many Latinas in the middle of Connecticut,” the Nicaragua native observed. “This is not our natural habitat,” she joked.

The symposium, held yearly to help Latinas become empowered and to develop their ability to take advantage of the opportunities available through networking and by drawing upon the experience and guidance of people, particularly Latinos, successful in fields such as education, business, communications and entrepreneurship.

The symposium is also very much a celebration of Latino pride. The attendees were clearly charged up and in an upbeat mood, with some women even dancing in the aisles to the Latin music being played in the background as they awaited the entrance of Marilyn Alverio, the symposium’s founder, producer and inspirational cheerleader.

“The energy and passion right now in this room is a gift,” Alverio told the crowd, “Let us not waste this gift.”

This symposium offered workshops with speakers and presenters, who included a few men, and served up a diverse menu of career, financial and personal growth advice. Their focus was as basic as the need to develop technological abilities and to find a good mentor. “You don’t have to do it alone,” said Belen Mendoza, who leads AARP’s public advocacy campaigns.

The attendees peppered panelists and speakers with questions about how they had reached their level of success and for practical insights on how to help achieve political change while not wanting to run for office.

During Navarro’s keynote address, she cited her political focus as stemming from being a refugee, when in 1980, as a result of the Sandinista revolution, she and her family immigrated to the United States. The path she took had some detours, which did not discourage her from her professional goals. “My advice to youths, she said, “is to get out of the house, be engaged and even do things for free, for a time.”

Patricia Russo, executive director of the Women’s Campaign School at Yale University, addressed the political question. The first thing, she said, is to make sure you are registered vote, something that millions of Latinas have not done. She added, “It is not just about running, we need people in campaign management; we need to create our own pipeline.”

In addition, Russo predicted, “Women will be the story of the mid-term (congressional) elections. We are changing the political culture.” She drew cheers from the audience when she added, “We want to change the world.”

Several speakers also stressed the importance of Latinos effectively investing their growing financial resources in more “than looking cute.” Glenda Chiapa, a MassMutual information technology manager and an active real estate investor in the Boston and New Hampshire markets, said “My motto is don’t buy shoes, buy houses.”

Latinas’ emerging leadership in all aspects of American society, while remaining true to their ethnic heritage, was stressed by two speakers: Navarro, and Stacie deArmas, a top executive with Nielsen, a global market research and data gathering company.

“Own your own Latinism and don’t apologize,” said deArmas. “I talk with my hands and can be loud,” she said, also pointing to the half dozen bracelets, each with meaning to her, which sometimes noticeably

jangled and drew questioning comments at the conference table. "This is who we are ... be authentic," she advised.

Navarro, who appears frequently on CNN and the talk show *The View*, evoked laughter and cheers as she strung together a series of derisive comments and sharp jabs focusing primarily on "deplorable" President Trump and U.S. Senator Rafael "Ted" Cruz, a Cuban-American and a Republican, like herself.

"If you are a Trump supporter, you are in the wrong room," Navarro said. She said there was no option other than fighting back hard against the president's divide and conquer tactics. "You do not change a man after he is done teething," she said.

While Navarro got the biggest laughs and some of the loudest cheers of the day, if anyone was the symposium's rock star, that accolade easily went to Yulín, the great-granddaughter of a sugar cane worker, who impressed attendees with her commitment to relieving the post-hurricane distress and building a better future for Puerto Rico, and with her modest and sincere demeanor as she warmly greeted everyone she met, including admiring hotel employees, and patiently posed for scores of photos.

As media people awaited a chance to talk with Yulín, dozens of people informally queued up to greet and have their photograph taken with the Puerto Rican leader. These admirers were mostly Latinas but also a handful of men who were attending as presenters and vendors, including the event's official photographer.

Among those eager to meet the Puerto Rican leader was Nelly Morales, a former Connecticut resident who had returned to help out at the symposium, a role she had played for several years. Morales has family living on Puerto Rico.

Yulín and Morales met in an embrace that was visibly emotional with tears coming to eyes of both women. Later, Morales would explain what she had said to the mayor.

"I especially wanted to thank her for that first interview on television. It meant a lot to us who have family on the island," Morales said, referring to her talk with CBS journalist David Begnaud shortly after Maria ravaged the island. Morales added, "Begnaud deserves a Pulitzer Prize for his coverage of Puerto Rico."

Yulín spoke about awards, such as the honorary doctorate her alma mater, Boston University, plans to bestow on her, as only important in keeping Puerto Rico, where some towns still lack electricity, in the conversation. "It is not about me, I am the face and the echo of voices," she said. "I only did what I had to do," she said. "People are dying in Puerto Rico, not killed by firearms, but killed by neglect."

"She is the most humble woman I ever met in my life," Alverio said.