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# Feature Organization

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## Hispanic women unite over English skills, leadership ability

By Maggie Hilty

“We are United Hispanic Women”—this is the English translation for Somos Hispanas Unidas, an organization that unites and empowers Hispanic women by helping them learn English and become involved in their communities here in the U.S.

For two years, Susana Ghio has headed Somos Hispanas Unidas. The organization formed after Ghio was involved with another group called Circle of Women in Seattle, which helped Spanish-speaking women who were victims of domestic violence. Eventually, Ghio and others branched off and created Somos Hispanas Unidas with the purpose of helping women learn English in order to build communication skills and further their careers.

“These women are educated—we have a nurse, a psychologist and an insurance worker. They just need to develop their English skills. That is where Somos Hispanas Unidas helps them,” said Ghio.

Somos Hispanas Unidas, serving the Silverton and Mount Angel communities, now has a stronghold of twelve women who each have degrees from their own countries, including Chile, Mexico and Argentina. They are very proficient in their native languages, and want to achieve proficiency in English.

The group helps Hispanic women develop their English and Spanish literacy skills, as well as managerial skills. Basic computer skills are an important aspect of their training, including keyboarding, using email, and learning programs such as Microsoft Word and Excel.

On May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2006, the organization signed 501-C papers and became a non-profit organization. This means that they are now able to write grants to fund projects ranging from providing classes for citizenship testing to creating awareness about underage drinking



Susana Ghio

in the Hispanic community.

“We are successful and ready to move on—now we are an institution,” said Ghio of their non-profit status.

Recently, Ghio received *The Statesman Journal’s* 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Athena Award for women in leadership.

“Although [receiving this award] was a great honor for me, I think that it is for the whole group, not just me,” said Ghio. “All I do is lead the women who are leaders. I could divide this award into twelve pieces!”

Ghio may be modest about her achievement, but many of the women in Somos Hispanas Unidas view her as a role model. In 1990, Ghio came to the U.S. to escape turmoil in her native country, Argentina. Although she had learned how to write English while in school in Argentina, she had no English speaking or listening skills as she had had little chance to use them while living there. Her chance came after moving to Oregon, where she earned her Master’s degree and began teaching. Even then she continued to learn.

“Trying to answer the phone or even fill the tank of my car was a daily challenge... I was embarrassed to talk in front of people knowing they did not understand me,” recalled Ghio. “The women in my group are feeling the same frustration I did, and I teach them to go forward no matter how difficult the task.”

Ghio sees the organization grow every day, and believes each of the twelve women are leaders with the desire to make a difference. Along with continuing to learn English and job skills, Ghio hopes that the women in the group can become inspirational speakers in order to reach as many people as possible.

“We are knitting a web within not only the Hispanic community, but also within the women population,” said Ghio.

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