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Sylvia Acevedo

Small-Town Girl's Skills and Love of People Led Her to Creation of Award-Winning CommuniCards

By Julie Tereshchuk

It's a classic tale of over-coming odds. Great odds. But unlike the classics, there's no fairytale ending to Sylvia Acevedo's story. Stay tuned, though. If anyone can beat the wicked witch or find her way through the enchanted forest, it's this rising Hispanic businesswoman.

Shame is the last emotion you'd associate with Acevedo. She exudes warmth, confidence and integrity. After all, she excelled in school, crafted an impressive corporate resume, then quite big business and launched her own company, which is

already creating a buzz. Yet for 20 years she has been dealing with the fall-out from her parents' death, a tragic episode that set off years of introspection and therapy, but also left her with the fortitude to bear the recent death of her younger sister.

Late in 2004, Acevedo put her business interests on hold to focus on 43-year-old Laura, ultimately placing her in hospice care at home in Las Cruces, N.M. As a big sister, legal guardian and firm friend, Acevedo has much to tell about Laura: of a

childhood bout of meningitis that left her developmentally disabled yet highly attuned to others' feelings, of her uncanny knack for remembering calendar dates, of her silver medal in speed skating representing the United State in the International Winter Special Olympics, of her love of dancing, particularly Mariachi.

It's common for Acevedo to deflect conversations about herself onto other people. "Oh, Silvia did a wonderful job on that projects," she says of an old friend. "Or "it was Tina who really brought the product together." She shines the light on their lives and achievements, not hers.

In their West Austin home, Acevedo's partner, Janet Osimo, smiles. "That is so typical of Sylvia: to give credit to others. ... She is the most thoughtful and giving person I have ever met." Case in point: The evening of Sept. 11, 2001, as many people closed their doors in shock, Acevedo opened hers, walking to her neighbors' homes delivering plates of cookies.

Hearing stories about—and told —Acevedo, her upbeat attitude is evident. It's innate, yet it has been honed by experience.

Laura was the only one of the four Acevedo siblings still living at home in Las Cruces in 1985. Their father, Benito, was a chemist at White Plains Missile Range. His pretty Mexican-born wife, Ofelia, was an active school and community volunteer. Acevedo, working for IBM in California at the time, recalls the day things changed forever. "My father felt like he didn't have any choices," she says. "My mother wanted to leave and he ended up killing her and then himself."

The simple story, told with a slight tremble to her voice, belies the day's complex impact on Acevedo. "It was like an explosion. You just want to get as far away as possible," she explains. Now she has overcome what she describes as the "tremendous shame" she felt for so long. "I had to do a lot of work," she says, "for many years."

When she finally felt ready to speak freely about that day, she lost her voice—for six weeks. "It's like going through the knot hole of those really difficult experiences, of letting go and forgiving," she says. These days she is able to acknowledge



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the foundation and support her parents gave the family. She's learned that traumatic experiences either "crush or "strengthen." In her case, she says, "They've given me strength, made me more compassionate and a lot more resilient."

The resiliency was obvious as Acevedo talked, in the weeks prior to Laura's death, of the impact of her sister on Acevedo and her family. In 1985, Laura became a pivot point as the stunned family rallied to care for her. In 2004, she brought the family together again, says Acevedo. "But [this time] we're coming together in such a loving way. It's hard to say when somebody's dying, but it does feel very joyful."

Joy Hymel, now an executive with the university System of Georgia, has been friends with Acevedo since the day they met at IBM in 1982. "She took me under her wing, which is one of her gifts that she has in life," says Hymel from her home in Atlanta.

There was the time back in the 1980s, fresh from a sabbatical in Europe, when Hymel walked into a job at Apple that Acevedo had scouted and then recommended her for. Then there was the support she got from Acevedo during Hymel's "very rough divorce." Twenty-three years of friendship is evident in Hymel's assessment of Acevedo—and the impact of tragedy on her friend. "Instead of being swalled up by the shame, the guilt or the anger, she tries to draw strength from it, learn and help someone else," she says.

Acevedo is one of the most self-aware people Hymel says she knows. "She takes in experiences and people and personalities that come in contact with her. She processes them so it benefits herself—in terms of personal growth—and it benefits the people around her," she says.

Hymel agrees that the work Acevedo has done to understand the meaning of her parents' death helped her with her sister's illness. "She was able to open up and share. She let us in to help her and to help Laura. And that's the essence of human relationships, I think. When you're able to connect

with a friend or a person on that intimate level and let them in to the dark parts."

Introspective and thoughtful she may be, but Acevedo's also a bundle of energy. At 47, she's had to drop soccer and running since blowing out a knee. To burn all that get-up-and-go, she strides the wide streets of her neighborhood with her two dogs, Cali and Nisso.

Acevedo loves golf and is an avid rock climber. Flicking through old photographs with her, she appears to be quite the daredevil—sailing around glaciers in South America, canoeing on the Amazon, grinning from the snowfields of Yosemite.

She's always been exuberant. In junior high school, she trained all summer to be strong enough to carry the three massive timbale drums in the marching band. By the start of school, her band director was convinced and made her first chair in the percussion section. "It was great fun," Acevedo says. "I loved the sound and being able to get an entire crowd on its feet. I had a four-year scholarship to ASU for percussion but decided against music as profession."

Instead, Acevedo opted to study industrial engineering. "From the moment I read about it, I knew that was what I wanted to study," she says. "I never once changed my major. I loved the blend of systems and people." She earned a full four-year scholarship from Sandia Laboratories to attend New Mexico State University. Before graduating in 1979, she had made the Dean's List and the

President's List, served on the Board of Regents, and played on the basketball team.

Then it was on to Stanford University,

fulfilling a long-time dream, for engineering graduate studies. When she arrived on the storied campus, the smart bilingual kid from small-town New Mexico was challenged as never before. Moving to one of the most affluent areas of the country and studying at one of the country's most prestigious universities was a major change, Acevedo later wrote: "I had never met people who were so wealthy, and never had I met the children of senators or industrialists."

Academics were at a new level as she competed with the best from around the world. "I was amazed at how hard students worked," recalls Acevedo. However, she says she "buckled down" and credits her academic advisors for successfully guiding her through her studies.

Soon she began taking classes at Stanford's Business School as part of her degree program, which gave her a valuable grounding for her future business exploits.

Despite the challenge of Stanford, which she readily admits, Acevedo is proud to be an alumna and to have shared the 1983 graduation ceremony with her parents. "It was incredible—what pomp and circumstance!"

In the corporate world, Acevedo hit her stride, leveraging both those Stanford B-School classes and her people skills. She remained in California and made homes in the elegant communities that nestle in the wooded hills above Silicon Valley, easily finding work at the high-tech companies that dominated the area as the industry began to surge.

Her resume from those years is littered with references to far exceeding targets set for her. As director of the Americas at Autodesk, the CAD software company, she grew revenue from \$2.3 million to \$20 million in a region where the product was available for free via piracy." At Tandem Computers International (which was bought out by Compaq and absorbed into its merger with Hewlett Packard), she was international sales manager and "sold \$6 million in revenue against a sales goal of \$1.2 million."

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Above, top to bottom: Sylvia Acevedo at a cousin's wedding with her sister, Laura (left), Janet Osimo (right) and her brother, Mario; with a CommuniCard display at an Austin Police Department community event n East Austin; and celebrating on her 40th birthday.



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Acevedo's a leader, and she inspired those working from her. Silvia Meyer, who met Acevedo in 1992 at IBM and worked for her at Autodesk, says, "She's a very good manager. She really pulls a team together. ... Her skill is understanding people."

Meyer says Acevedo always pushed her Autodesk team to go "beyond just doing the business itself." In 1995, Acevedo and Meyer worked to gain Autodesk's support of the Expedition Inspiration Fund, a team of breast-cancer survivors who climbed Mount Aconcagua in Argentina to raise awareness, hope and funds for breast-cancer research. Acevedo says she treasures the sheaf of personal thank-you letters she received from the women of the expedition.

In 1997, Dell Computer lured her to Austin, where she managed a \$10 million budget. True to form, she increased her group's market share from 11th to second in industry-standard rankings.

While at Dell she met J. Rene Ward, who now runs her own realty business. Ward sums up Acevedo's business skill: "She can look at the tactical and see the strategic. By that I mean Sylvia has the ability to say what we're going to do now. And then, what the long-term impact is of that decision."

After leaving Dell in 2000, Acevedo launched and then sold her own technology company, which gave her valuable venture-capital experience and set the stage for the opening of CommuniCard in May 2002.

In launching her own company, Acevedo the engineer united with Acevedo the communicator. The products she developed ease the interaction in the workplace of those who don't speak or read both Spanish and English.

"We're solving a problem for people," says Acevedo. "That's what really motivates me about the product and the company."

Yes, she grew up in a Spanish-speaking household and is still in contact with her family in Mexico, so she has an insight into the language barriers many immigrants face. Yet before setting up the company, Acevedo says she also thought about "what is the essence of who I am." She says people have stopped her all over the world to ask for directions. "People look at me and trust me," she says. She applied the concept to the world of work,

and the engineer crystallized the problem she would work to solve.

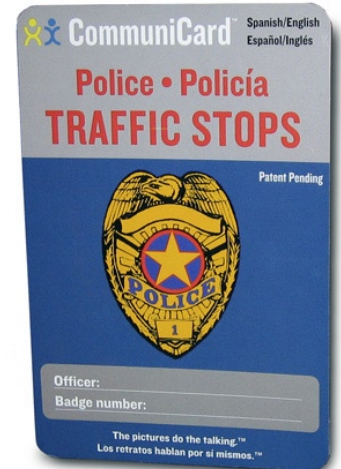
As Acevedo stresses, "We didn't go in with a solution. We tried to help individuals solve their problem in the most efficient and convenient way." Osimo spent long hours researching the best format for the concept. Initial ideas for a book were discarded, focus groups of both Spanish and English speakers were polled, and finally the card design was chosen. Mario Acevedo, a published artist, provided the illustrations, while Tina Hudock of Austin's Yellowfin Studio provided major design input.

Today CommuniCard has a product range of foldout cards for construction and maintenance tasks including demolition, dry walling and lawn care. The Austin Police Department uses the law enforcement cad that was recently launched. For household cleaning, there's a deck of cards—so a homeowner can leave cards around the home in the areas that need specific attention.

After her successful years in the corporate world, it's clear that Acevedo also has the chops to make it as an entrepreneur. "She rocks," enthuses successful Austin entrepreneur Tom Myer, owner of Triple Dog Dare Media. Along with Hudock's design studio and Kelsey August's LoneStar Direct, Myer's business is one of the local companies that Acevedo credits with CommuniCard's success.

"Austin is an amazing place," says Acevedo. People have gone out of their way with advice, support, capital and contacts," she adds. Acevedo has become an active member of business groups including Austin's eWomenNetwork chapter, the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce and Las Comadres, a national network that connects Latinas.

She points out that she does not regard the Hispanic community simply as potential CommuniCard consumers but rather "as a demographic force with a major impact in U.S. society. I saw a pressing social need and created a solution that benefits both the Hispanic community and those who hire its members."



With CommuniCard barely 2 years old, the United States Hispanic Chamber of Commerce acknowledged her efforts by honoring her as Region II Business Woman of the Year in September 2004. In February, CommuniCard received the Small Business of the Year award from Austin's Hispanic Chamber.

Acevedo has jumped into volunteerism as well—her mother "had a huge influence on her," says Osimo—with Youth Voices in Ink, the non-profit school outreach program of Badger Dog, and Austin-based literary publishing house. It's founder and executive director, Melanie Moore, after meeting Acevedo through Executive Women's Gold Association Austin, selected her as a founding board member. "She has become integral to the organization," says Moore. "She's a marketing and sales whiz."

Beyond lending her professional acumen, Acevedo, an avid reader and creative writer, is also a force at the readings and signings held by Badger Dog to showcase work by students, many of whom are Hispanic. Her presence and interaction at the autograph parties "really makes an impact on the families," says Moore. "She dives right into the event and works the crowd, connecting with them one-on-one. ... Her presence as a successful Hispanic business leader, as a role model, is great." ★