

GEM

THE NATIONAL GEM CONSORTIUM



“What appealed to me about GEM was there were going to be other GEM Fellows I could count on for guidance and support. It wasn’t just ‘Here’s a check, go make it happen.’ It was the support of the organization behind me.”

GEM ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT: SYLVIA ACEVEDO, The Great Communicator

Sylvia Acevedo knew she was onto something when she couldn't beg her samples back from the focus groups. "I think we only have one prototype from those days because the people wouldn't give them back," she said, laughing ruefully.

What Acevedo, a rural New Mexico girl turned Stanford University engineer, developed with her brother is changing how people communicate across the English-Spanish language barrier. With Acevedo's hand-held product the "ahhh!" factor doesn't come from how many words an electronic dictionary can hold or how fast a microprocessor can provide a translation. The beauty is its intuitive simplicity—the low-tech, high touch CommuniCard™.

Setting the Future in Motion

Ignoring a high school guidance counselor's advice to use her proficiency in math by becoming a schoolteacher, "I just never saw myself as a teacher, but this was in the '70s." Acevedo met with a local college's dean of industrial engineering and left determined to compete in college against "Einsteins"—but it turned out that at New Mexico State University, she was in classes with the same guys from her high school. "And I was better than them in math. Once I found that out, I kind of relaxed and was able to focus on the studies."

Big Dreams Colored Cardinal, White, and Green

The desire to learn more meant graduate school. "Without a GEM fellowship I would not have been able to go on to follow my dream. Graduate school is really expensive, especially at a school like Stanford. Having the grades and background to get in was one thing. Being able to afford it was another," she said. Stanford was a milestone for a Latina, who was a first-generation American on her mother's side. All of her grandparents were born in Mexico. The Cardinal opened her eyes to what the future held for graduates.



Acevedo then spent 18 years building the business of corporate giants like IBM, Apple, and Dell. As an IBM lead facilities engineer, she took a 75,000-foot clean room manufacturing floor and literally turned it inside out. With all the manufacturing space next to the perimeter walls, it became a windowed showcase into state-of-the-art, high-end disk drive assembly. She ensured the addition of visibility and color came without compromising efficiency and workflow.

Her stellar record required one thing. "I really had to work hard at letting go of a big chip on my shoulder. I think when you're one of a few and you're inexperienced, sometimes you don't feel you've gotten the opportunities when you think you should and you develop a chip on your shoulder. Sometimes I'd think, 'Gosh, I didn't get that because of the way I look.'" Acevedo let go of doubt by focusing on being the best. "When I did that my career took off and lots more opportunities came my way."



A New Way To Talk

During time off the corporate track, she started and sold two businesses. Always asked by friends to check on their construction projects, her new future took shape. "I realized all the contractors were after me not for my ability to help on the job site but for my Spanish-speaking skills. This is a really big problem. Being an engineer you like to have a common-sense solution to everyday problems. So I went about trying to solve it.

Existing dictionaries and books were all wrong. Acevedo called on her brother Mario, an illustrator and mechanical engineer, to add visuals, but focus groups didn't like their book either—or their games, software, videos, and magazines. It was a deck of cards and a plastic-backed fold-out sheet, like a map, that kept walking out the door.

CommuniCard is in the patent process and new products are in development. "Our newest is for police officers for traffic stops. We've been asked to create CommuniCard for just about every application you can imagine," said Acevedo. And it's clear why the demand is so great.

The graying Baby Boom and decidedly youthful Hispanic population boom are the nation's twin demographic forces. "I see a kind of balance there, whether it is easy or uneasy, in terms of an aging population and a need for semi-skilled, manual labor. I see lots of opportunity for CommuniCard in that space," she said. "It's really gratifying and fun to be working on not just a business but working with people to solve a problem and make their lives easier, both the workers and the people who hire them."

Read more about Acevedo and CommuniCard at www.thecomunicard.com.