

# The Give: Carmen Castellano and Her Husband Work to Put 'a Brown Face on Philanthropy'

by Cheryl Brownstein-Santiago on May 11, 2012



At 73, **Carmen Castellano** is not quite ready to rest on her laurels, but the co-founder and president of the Castellano Family Foundation is contemplating the possibility of retiring for a third time. The first time, she grew restless and went back to work after only a couple of months. But that was a couple of years before she and her husband, **Alcario**, whom she calls Al, won the California Super Plus Lottery. Taking home \$41.5 million net could have turned their lives upside down. Yet they seemed to have wound up pretty close to where they started-working hard to see how they could help others. Over the 11 years since they won \$141 million drawing, which she recalls was the largest single ticket for California's Super Lotto Plus, they endowed their foundation with \$5 million and subsequently have awarded \$3 million in grants, running what the Castellanos call a "mom and pop operation" in some ways. But in others they are Latino family foundation leaders and determined advocates for diversity in U.S. philanthropy.

Carmen Castellano wishes that they could be part of a network of Latino family foundations. She has made it her personal mission to promote giving among Latinos and also to encourage U.S. philanthropy and nonprofits to open up their boards to a more diverse cohort of trustees. They need to be forthright, she said,

in seeking to understand the needs of the Latino communities that they might wish to serve.

The Castellano Family Foundation, she said, has worked with nonprofits to diversify their boards and programs as a grantmaking condition. Other funders should do the same, as a matter of equity and truly serving the most needy, she added.

Their foundation's giving is pretty much limited to Santa Clara County and to arts and Latino causes. They still try to read and respond to every request, but typically give to organizations they have already identified.

Now, they are preparing to hire a manager to run the day-to-day operation. Their three grown children plan to join her on the board of directors, while Mr. Castellano plans to retire from the foundation.

The couple was planning to celebrate her 73rd birthday in April with a weekend in San Francisco, including a visit to a Mexican photography exhibit at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. They look forward to more photography and videography, which are Mr. Castellano's passions, and more reading and playing piano music by classical composers and contemporary Mexican songwriters for Carmen, who studied piano for 10 years in her youth and picked it up again more recently. She culls the New York Times Book Review every Sunday in search of more novels and occasional nonfiction books to read.

The couple will also celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary this year. Five years her senior, Alcario was just a youngster when he first noticed her family driving a shiny Packard. They would stop for ice cream at a store where he worked on their way to grandparent visits in Fresno.

"A Mexican family with four girls driving this car made quite an impression on him," she said. Later, in high school, they met at a dance. She was born in Watsonville, Calif., and he was from Artesia, NM. Each had a parent who had been born in Mexico. Her parents ran a trucking business together in Watsonville when she was growing up, and her mother later owned the Mexico Meat Market in Pajaro, Calif.

"I remembered him because he was tall," she said. "He's six feet one inch, and I'm five feet." But it wasn't until a couple of years later, after they met again at a wedding of mutual friends that they started dating. They married and settled in San Jose.

Mr. Castellano, a veteran of Army military service, had a job in the Bay Area aerospace industry until 1970 and then worked for Safeway until his retirement in 1990. Mrs. Castellano worked for 33 years as an administrative secretary and office manager at San Jose City College, where she co-founded and was president of the Latino Education Association, an advocacy group for Latino employees and students. She was also a co-founder of its Affirmative Action Committee and President of the Classified Senate.

It was at San Jose City College, when she was about 60, that Mr. Castellano persuaded her to join him in retirement. She soon returned to work, but scaled back to 25-hour weeks, and then left her job permanently after they won the lottery.

Carmen Castellano first became interested in community work when she joined the Venture Club in Watsonville when she was 19 or 20.

"I was a member, then an officer and [later] I was the president. We did charitable work, scholarships and that kind of thing, so I just got hooked in doing nonprofit work and volunteerism," she said. She remained deeply involved in nonprofit causes and fundraising related to her children's schooling.

Now, in addition to the foundation, she serves on the board of the National Association of Latino Arts and Culture and is a member of the Latina Coalition of Silicon Valley and the Santa Clara County Office of Education's Artspiration initiative steering committee.

### **Why start a foundation?**

It was such a natural impulse. The day that we found out that we won, my husband was up by himself. He is an early riser, I'm always a late riser. It took a while for him to tell me. It was too early to call our children. It was six in the morning. So we sat there thinking, and I took a piece of paper and started making a list of organizations we could donate to. So before we even told our

children, I was ready to give it away. We had already been doing what we could do through our volunteerism and giving what we could to support our nonprofits. It was great to be able to do something beyond what we had been doing--doing something meaningful.

We don't have a website, we don't have a formal application form, and our process has always been that we contact organizations that we want to support, but we do get a lot of correspondence for grants that are unsolicited. At some level, it's still a mom and pop operation, so we have our board meetings at the kitchen table, and it's just my husband and I who are trustees now.

We are undergoing some changes. I'm going to be stepping down as president, and I'm in the process of hiring a director of operations and programming. We have three adult children, and they are going to be joining the board. At the same time, my husband is going to be retiring.

### **Can anyone apply for a grant?**

We try to respond to every request. There are primarily two focus areas, the Arts and Latino organizations. And it's here in Santa Clara County. We don't generally fund beyond this geographic area.

### **How do you connect with other family foundations?**

Al and I have been attending the Council on Foundations; they have an annual family foundation conference. It's a great conference. The last conference was in Miami in February. I was invited to speak at the closing plenary session, which was quite an honor.

There are very few people of color that were even at this conference in attendance. So we're one of a handful of regulars that are there, and we speak up on the issues to promote diversity in philanthropy.

That was one of the topics that was discussed at this plenary session. Of course, I quoted that HIP report that so few philanthropic dollars go to Latinos.

I take advantage of the opportunity... Potential grantees should know that there's a huge marketing potential. Sometimes they listen and they respond and, oh, their lightbulb goes on. When I make presentations and speeches, when it's the grantmakers, I say, 'Why don't you join me and make that one of your criteria, not

[committing to award grants to nonprofits] unless they have a diverse board and senior staff?' Wouldn't it be great if we all had that criteria? So that's sort of our mantra.

And some respond, 'Well we don't know who to ask,' or they ask us for recommendations. In San Jose, there's a Latino board leadership training program... . But that's an example of addressing the situation head on. That's what communities can do.

**What do you consider the ultimate goal of your family foundation? What would you like its legacy to be?**

One of the goals is to put a brown face on philanthropy. That's why we're willing to be really visible. We go to many of the conferences... so people can see that Latinos are philanthropic. There are so few Latino foundations, I keep asking, "Who are they? Where are they?" Because I would like to be part of Latino philanthropists. Ours is the only one that I know of that has a Latino focus here in the Bay Area.

We're well recognized in this community because of the work we do. We support so many grassroots [groups] in areas like domestic violence and juvenile... . People come up and thank us for that and some people have told us that when they see our name as a supporter of an organization, they know that it's good. We're very cautious of what organizations we support. We know the community looks at that ...so that's a big responsibility.

And just the fact that we're around: Two people we know are interested in starting their own family foundation. They are looking into establishing foundations with Latino focus. They are Latinos. ...

You don't have to have \$5 million to do it. I know there are some foundations that have less than a million dollars. I'd be glad to talk to them; that's something I encourage.

**What have the downsides been on this journey for you and your husband?**

Downsides? So much work, because we're doing it ourselves. We do the foundation out of our home. I have a part-time assistant. But it's very work intense. There are other ways to do it. You could have a donor-advised fund

through a community foundation. We looked into that, but we decided that wasn't the direction we wanted to go in. We wanted to be more hands-on and learn as we were doing.

I wouldn't discourage others, but I wouldn't do it now because, over the past 10 years, we have established relationships with our grantees. We have cultivated these personal relationships, and that is one of the most important things we do. So if we have a donor-advised fund, then the [community] foundation would have that relationship. Now our children are going to get involved and do the work and we're very excited about that.

**Is there anything else that you would like to add?**

I think it's just really important to speak up, to advocate, to promote diversity in philanthropy. That's why, when we go to these conferences and workshops, Al and I are always willing to speak up and address that issue. I think advocacy is important for all of us who are in a position to do that. Let's admit it, people will listen to you if you have money.

**Do universities and nonprofits have a role to play in addressing the disparities in funding and diversity?**

Well, yes. Like the Northern California Grantmakers, I know they're addressing it. The D5 Coalition [a five-year national effort to increase diversity, equity and inclusion in U.S. philanthropy] and the Rockefeller Foundation are doing something about that.