

Courier News

Alvarez addresses Wise Latinas brunch at ECC

By JANELLE WALKER For Sun-Times Media

When Cook County State's Attorney Anita Alvarez ran for office in 2008, she was told there was no way the county's voters would elect a woman, let alone a Latina, to lead the second-largest criminal justice system in the U.S.

But not only did Alvarez win the election, she did so against five men, three of whom were politically connected in Chicago.

The "glass ceiling" for women, and Hispanics, is disappearing, Alvarez told about 50 women and men Tuesday at the first Wise Latinas brunch at Elgin Community College. The event was put on by the school's Organization of Latin American Students in honor of Women's History Month, club President Karla Lopez explained.

Alvarez also was asked to speak to recognize the leadership of Hispanics like herself and Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, Lopez said.

Alvarez never expected to become an attorney, growing up in Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood, she said. But her parents stressed the importance of education. Alvarez went to Loyola University to study social work, and taking the Law School Admission Test was a last-minute decision, she said.

When she was in law school, there was just one other Hispanic woman in her class, Alvarez said, and they often were confused with each other. It was strange, she added, walking into a room and finding she was the only woman or the only Hispanic there.

When she graduated from law school, Alvarez began working at the Cook County prosecutor's office and was third from the top in the department when she decided to run for the state's attorney job.

Since winning the election, Alvarez said, she has been able to make changes in the office, including promoting more women and minorities. She's also worked on improving victims rights and domestic violence programs. She is working with state lawmakers to strengthen the laws on human trafficking, including helping the young girls and boys who are trafficked.

"We want to give them the help and services they need," Alvarez said, and treat a 12-year-old girl being trafficked as a victim, not a prostitute.

Women also must watch out for each other and help the younger generation achieve, Alvarez said. She prefers speaking to students, she added, because education is an important step in climbing the ladder to success.

As women do so, she said, "we can't pull it up behind us. We need to support each other ... and be there for each other" to help other women climb that same ladder, she said.

Emi Morales Salazar, an area attorney, attended the brunch to hear what Alvarez had to say. Although she went through law school more than 20 years after Alvarez did, her story sounded familiar in many ways, Salazar said.

"I can relate to her story, because I do come from a different background from those I went to college with. But her story shows that the doors are open" for Hispanics to excel in professional fields, Salazar said.