

CSSD Chronicle

State of Connecticut Judicial Branch
Court Support Services Division
Friday, October 11, 2013



CSSD Celebrates Hispanic Heritage Month

On October 3rd, CSSD celebrated Hispanic Heritage Month at ITBD in New Britain. The half-day program was open to all CSSD staff and organized by over 20 volunteers. The day's program was emceed by Daisy Ortiz, CSSD Court Planner, with technical assistance provided by Troy Brown, Program Manager, Training Academy.

Each year, Americans observe National Hispanic Heritage Month from September 15th to October 15th by celebrating the histories, cultures, and contribution of American citizens whose ancestors came from Spain, Mexico, the Caribbean, and Central and South America. The recognition started in 1968 as Hispanic Heritage Week, and was expanded by President Ronald Reagan in 1988 to cover a 30-day period. This time frame coincides with the anniversary dates of independence that are celebrated by many Latin American countries.

The Power of Cultural Knowledge—Executive Director William Carbone welcomed the audience of over 120 CSSD staff and guests, and recognized members of the CSSD Cultural Competency Advisory Committee for their efforts in fostering cultural awareness. He noted that celebrating events, such as Hispanic Heritage Month, is one way to recognize the achievements, customs, and legacies of a specific ethnicity which, in turn, helps staff work more effectively with court-involved clients, and each other.



LPRAC Chairman Isaias T Diaz, Esq.

The Keynote Speaker for the event was Isaias T. Diaz, Esq., Chairman of the Connecticut Latino and Puerto Rican Affairs Commission (LPRAC), who presented detailed statistics on the various demographics of Latinos, both nationally and state-wide. As Chairman of LPRAC, Diaz's role is to work with others on the 21-member, non-partisan commis-

sion to make recommendations to the Connecticut General Assembly and the Governor for new or enhanced policies that foster progress in achieving health, safety, educational success, economic self-

sufficiency for Latinos, and end discrimination in Connecticut. As part of his presentation, Diaz spoke at length about the severe educational disparity and achievement gap in Connecticut between Hispanic youth and other racial groups. He encouraged CSSD staff to share LPRAC stats with others in the criminal justice field, with a goal of using the information to promote successful outcomes among Hispanic clients.

Dance and Poetry—Gira (Gigi) Cuffee is an MST Therapist for Connecticut Junior Republic (CJR), a CSSD contracted program that works with court-involved youth. Cuffee is also an accomplished Latina poet, dancer, and performer who shared her artistic gifts with the group by reciting two poems that reflect her Dominican roots. Accompanied by CSSD Family Relations Counselor David Waterman on a tribal drum, Cuffee recited *Child of the Americas*, a poem by Aurora Levins Morales, that captures the essence of what it means to be a person from the



Gigi Cuffee, CJR MST Therapist

Hispanic diaspora. The second poem, *Dance with Me*, written by Cuffee, celebrates the author's growth as a Latina and citizen of the world. It is an invitation to people to celebrate their differences, together, in order to learn from each other:

...So, I challenge you to *Dance with Me*.
Let's celebrate what we can become to be.
Let's break those chains that has divided humanity
In ignorance and shame...

Hands-on Activities—The remainder of the morning was dedicated to several “Breakout Sessions” that allowed guests to actively participate in a dance class (“The Art and Origin of Latin Dance”), a cooking demonstration (“A Taste of Latin America”), and a panel discussion (“Being Hispanic: From Their Perspective”).

Latin Dance—Feet were moving and hips were swaying to the quick beat of Latin music as CSSD Compliance Specialist Trainee Allyson Bettini, and Fred Astaire dancer/studio owner Steven Powell, flawlessly demonstrated the basic steps to a variety of Spanish dances. Bettini, who is also an accomplished dancer and instructor, gave a brief history of the merengue, tango, cha-cha and other dances. Then, it was time for group participation as everyone found a partner and stepped to the rumba and salsa. Despite the coolness of the autumn day, several fans needed to be brought in to the room to temper the heightened heat generated by all the dancers.



Steven Powell and Allyson Bettini (center) demonstrate basic dance steps

Latin Food—Alejandra Hessenplug, President of the Food Service Management Program at Naugatuck Valley Community College, and Chef Kashia Cave, President/Executive at *My City Kitchen* helped guests make, and sample, a simple guacamole recipe and a shrimp ceviche dish. There were few leftovers, a lot of smiling faces, and high praise for the tasty treats made during the session.

My City Kitchen is a public charity organization, located in Meriden, that works to promote healthy eating habits, build self-esteem, and foster a sense of belonging in children so they grow into healthy adults. Classes are conducted at schools, churches, and other public and private venues. Chef Cave relies on volunteers to assist with the food preparation, clean-up, and cooking demonstrations. Seventeen-year-old Alex, who lives in Meriden, volunteered to help at the CSSD event and had an interesting story to tell.



Alex, Chef Kashia Cave from “My City Kitchen” and CSSD Executive Director Bill Carbone

When Alex was fourteen, he became court-involved as a juvenile in the Middletown Court. His probation officer, Rene Rodriguez, connected him with *My City Kitchen* as part of an education and job readiness program. According to Alex, he wasn't really excited about cooking, but Chef Cave changed his opinion. Three years later, he is one of Chef Cave's best volunteers, and helps out often at events. He even had the opportunity to travel to Europe for three weeks in the summer with the People to People Student Ambassador Program.

Alex's face lights up when you ask him to describe his favorite recipe. “Paglia e Fieno,” he replies with a smile, and then begins to tell you how to make this mouth-watering fettuccine and cream sauce dish with prosciutto and peas. Now, as a junior in high school, he has a 3.8 GPA, makes the honor roll each quarter, and most importantly, stays out of trouble. He's even met a few celebrities during his volunteer cooking gigs, including

“Top Chef” Kerry Heffernan. Alex has also showcased his cooking skills by appearing on CT Style Channel 8, and he participated in the NBC 30 Health and Wellness Festival. Alex isn't sure what his future plans are after high school, but he hopes to eventually go to college after a tour in the armed services.

Latin Identity—A member of the Public Defender’s Office, and three CSSD staff, shared their thoughts on what it’s like to be Hispanic in the United States based on their individual experiences. The discussion was moderated by Program Manager Troy Brown and panel members included Michaelangelo Palmieri, a Juvenile Probation Supervisor in Middletown; Isabel Alvarez, CSSD Court Planner at the Training Academy; Isabel Logan, a social worker for the Division of the Public Defender’s Office; and, Erika Nowakowski, a CSSD Court Planner for Programs and Services.



Isabel Logan, Michaelangelo Palmieri, Isabel Alvarez and Erika Nowakowski

Palmieri, born and raised in the United States, with English as his primary language, spoke of his difficulty at times to “fit in” with the Latino community despite his Colombian heritage on his mother’s side, and his ability to speak fluent Spanish. Conversely, Alvarez spoke of her struggle to assimilate into American culture and gain fluency in English after growing up in Colombia and moving to the United States as an adult. Logan is of Puerto Rican descent and shared examples of her evolving appreciation for her culture now that she is an adult and mother and her increased comfort level when she visits family in Puerto Rico each year. Her desire is to pass on the Spanish language and cultural traditions to her

children. Nowakowski spoke of the fear and secrecy she felt as a child growing up in California where her family immigrated illegally from Honduras, but feels she has assimilated well into American society and is proud to now be a U.S. citizen. However, she also expressed regret about losing a portion of her Spanish language fluency, and is uncertain if she will ever visit Honduras in the future.

A Delicious Latin Feast!—Following all the morning activities, most of the guests returned to the main conference room at ITBD and were treated to a catered lunch they purchased, provided by Negrita’s Restaurant in New Britain. The menu included arroz con gandules (rice with pigeon peas), pollo guisado (stewed chicken), ensalada de papa (potato salad), and everyone’s favorite, platanos maduros (sweet plantains). The dessert table contained flan, budin (bread pudding), pastelillo de guava (fruit-filled pastry), and many more sweet treats.

The response from those who attended the event was a positive one. A recent memo from the Training Academy staff noted that a majority of survey respondents came away with an increased understanding of the Latino experience in the United States and felt better equipped to interact with the Latino population in the future. One respondent commented: “In my nine years, this was the most organized cultural awareness event. Everyone demonstrated a passion for Hispanic Culture, and I really enjoyed the panel I attended. I strongly recommend that cultures continue to be celebrated. It was an educational and joyful experience!”

Many individual CSSD offices throughout the state have planned individual celebrations for their staff to recognize Hispanic Heritage Month. The next edition of the CCAC Cultural Compass, scheduled to be published before December, will contain brief highlights of those office events.



Spanish-style buffet provided by Negrita’s Restaurant, New Britain

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*The CSSD Chronicle is a regular publication of information and news about the Court Support Services Division. Questions or comments on this edition, or suggestions for future articles, can be directed to [Linda.Grzeika@jud.ct.gov](mailto:Linda.Grzeika@jud.ct.gov)*