

# New chamber program to serve Hispanic women

By Jonathan Turner, [jturner@qconline.com](mailto:jturner@qconline.com) | Posted: Saturday, January 9, 2016 8:16 pm

The Greater Quad Cities Hispanic Chamber of Commerce (GQCHCC) is launching a program to help Hispanic women rise in the professional world.

Empowering Latina Leadership Alliance (ELLA) aims to inspire and empower Latinas, to provide networking opportunities and to assist in small business development.

"Latinas have been leading the nation, and this is our time to move forward in education, politics, government and business," said Juanita Zertuche, Black Hawk College's transition coordinator for the international student program and a member of the all-female ELLA steering committee.

"I see ELLA as an opportunity for us to help each other and to help us continue to grow by offering support in our programming," she said. "ELLA is an awesome opportunity for creating a large support network."

The group hopes local Latinas, and non-Hispanic women, too, will collaborate and share their experiences, including how they overcame barriers to success, said ELLA leader Zenaida Landeros, program director at the Q-C Hispanic chamber, which has 200 members and formed in late 2008.

"Maybe that will help younger Latinas move forward and motivate them and inspire them to stay in school or form their own businesses," she said. "They will have somebody they can go to as a mentor."

Ms. Landeros has been with GQCHCC for four years and is working toward a master's degree in nonprofit administration from the University of Notre Dame. She's seen the growing Q-C Latina community spend countless volunteer hours on top of their professional and personal aspirations.

"I am proud of what many of our Latina leaders do every day," Ms. Landeros said.

The ELLA steering committee includes representatives of Community Health Care, Black Hawk and Augustana colleges, University of Iowa, East Moline School District, Hola America and some



Zenaida Landeros and Patty Casas at the Greater Q-C Hispanic Chamber of Commerce in Moline, Wednesday, Jan. 6, 2016. The chamber is starting a new program, Empowering Latina Leadership Alliance (ELLA) -- to help local Latinas network and and improve professionally.

women-owned small businesses. The educational aspect is important as more Latinas are graduating from college, Ms. Landeros said.

"They can provide advice on careers," she said of the committee members. "They're the ones guiding us, letting us know what younger people need are motivation and leadership, having access to connections and mentors."

There are more than 4 million Hispanic-owned businesses in the country, up 57 percent since 2007, according to a 2015 study. The number of Latina entrepreneurs is growing, and today Latinas own 36 percent of all companies owned by minority women, Ms. Landeros said.

"In the country, Hispanics are starting businesses faster than any other minority group, and the Latinas — the women — are the ones driving that," GQCHCC executive director Lee Vasquez said. "We're hoping we can provide some resources to those small businesses that are getting started."

Any woman, not just Hispanics, can participate in ELLA programming, he said, noting a large portion of his chamber members are not Hispanic.

"What the driver is, they want to connect to the Hispanic community, with the way the country is going, with the Hispanic growth in population," Mr. Vasquez said. "The more the population grows, the more opportunities for those who want to start small businesses."

Patty Casas, a realtor for Keller Williams and a member of the steering committee, said she would have liked to have had ELLA when she switched careers 14 years ago and began in real estate.

"When I started, it was really tough," she said. "I'm very grateful I didn't give up and pursued it."

"I want to help empower all Latinas everywhere to be the best that they can be and help them know that we have a great deal of value in our communities," Ms. Casas said. "Networking helps us grow and become stronger and more knowledgeable. Anything our minds can conceive, our minds can achieve."

While Latinas have achieved a significant presence in business and higher education, young Latinas still face many challenges, Ms. Landeros said. ELLA will provide opportunities for networking, educational workshops, guest speakers and mentoring, she noted.

Events — including its inaugural reception Jan. 21 in Moline — will move around the Quad-Cities, she said.