

# DEI Insider

a diversity, equity, and inclusion periodical from Nukk-Freeman & Cerra, P.C.



## MY NEXT GUEST

NEEDS NO INTRODUCTION

WITH SHARINA RODRIGUEZ

This is a play on David Letterman's talk show, "My Next Guest Needs No Introduction with David Letterman," where he interviews iconic individuals who "need no introduction" given their notoriety, impactful lives, and contributions to society. My mother is pretty iconic in my eyes, hence why no introduction is needed.

I started the interview by asking her about her decision to move to the U.S., and it quickly became one of the most interesting stories of a professional woman and mother just getting stuff done! Here it goes...\*

**1. Why did you decide to move to the United States?** Well, your father lived in the U.S. before we were married. We met in the Dominican Republic years prior. Some time went by, he moved to the U.S., and we reconnected while he was on vacation back home. We decided we would start a relationship, and eventually get married with the intention of me joining him in the U.S.

**2. How was your experience living apart?** I continued my life as normal while I waited for my permanent residency. You were born during that time, and we lived a normal life in the Dominican Republic. I was a young architect and fully dedicated to making a name for myself in my profession. As a recent graduate, I had already developed a pretty impressive portfolio. I worked on projects for Oscar de la Renta, Julio Iglesias, and designed the cobble stone road in the touristic Zona Colonial in Santo Domingo, which I still get to admire when we visit.



**3. Tell me more about your journey to the U.S.** In 1997, I received my residency and you (at 6 years old) and I moved to Miami to live with my brother. The plan was for your father to eventually meet us, and we would live in Miami as a family. However, your father had already started a business in Rochester, NY, and he believed it was a better choice for our

family to settle there. We had visited Rochester before, and I hated it. It was so cold, and the snowstorms were like nothing I had ever seen. However, you and I never adapted to Miami. Well, you remember [Oh, yes I do], we experienced racism and colorism during our time in Miami. Neither of us were used to that, and since it felt as though we could never call Miami "home," your father and I decided it was best to settle in upstate New York.

**4. How was your time in Rochester?** We moved to Rochester in 1998. That time was exceptionally difficult for me. Not only was it a complete culture shock, but we had no family in the area, and it was so different from what we were used to. I also spoke very little English at the time, and the Hispanic community in Rochester was very small.

My language limitations at the time made it difficult for me to become an architect in the U.S., and since I was so used to being independent, I just wanted to find any job to contribute to our family. Your father's friend owned a hair salon, and I asked him for a job. At first, he refused because he could not fathom hiring an architect at his hair salon. I insisted, and he eventually agreed to offer me a position as manager overseeing operations. I was grateful for this job because he also had a daughter your age, and he allowed you to come to the salon after school. [I remember playing with boxes of dye, clips, and rollers. I could probably still make the best roller stacks you have ever seen!]

In 2000, I received a call from an insurance agent offering me life insurance. He was a nice man from Panama who spoke Spanish. After a few minutes on the call, he offered me a job at his agency servicing Spanish speaking clients. I started the very next day. After six months, he offered to pay for me to obtain my insurance licenses, which I did, and that was my start in the insurance industry.

\*My thoughts and reactions are included in brackets throughout.

## ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

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**5. If you had to pick one, what was the hardest part?** Accepting that I was walking away from the career I worked so hard to build. I was already starting to see the fruits of my labor and had many successes even as a young architect. It was my passion, and I had to walk away.

**6. How did you eventually make it to New Jersey?** In 2005, your father's business had grown and he was getting a lot of work in the NY metro area, so we decided it was best to move to New Jersey.

**7. How did your professional life evolve after your move to New Jersey?** I decided to go back to school to learn how to create digital plans (blueprints). The plans I previously hand drew, I quickly learned how to create on the computer. Soon after, I began working with an architecture firm. I was finally working in my field. After a few months, I was referred to a kitchen and bath design company in Ridgewood. I went to the interview and decided to take the job. After a few years, that company opened a location in lower Manhattan.

In 2007, your father and I divorced. [That's a story for another day]

During the 2008 recession, the company took a hard hit, and by 2010, it closed. I found myself single, unemployed, and with a child in college. I started looking for jobs in the same field, but I was having a really hard time finding suitable positions, so I decided to go back to insurance. I studied for my insurance licenses, and in 2011, I became a licensed insurance agent in New Jersey. I have been in that field ever since.

**8. Did you ever regret moving to the U.S.? Why?** Yes. [Gasp!] I am appreciative of everything I have been able to accomplish in the U.S. I have lived a comfortable life here, and I was able to provide a good life for you. Look, you're a lawyer. [Thanks, Mami]. It may be a shock to you, but even 27 years later, I still regret moving to the U.S. and giving up on my dream of being a prestigious architect, which I was already starting to accomplish. It still makes me sad sometimes to think of "what it could've been" had I stayed and continued to pursue my career, but those are just some of the sacrifices we, as parents, make for our children. [\*Queue tears\* Thank you, your eternally grateful daughter]



## Jumping The Broom

### A RESPECTFUL NOD TO FAMILY ANCESTRY

For many engaged couples developing their own special meaning for ceremonial elements becomes the true beauty of a wedding. For our very own Iman and husband Charlie, jumping the broom provided another unique layer to their special ceremony earlier this year.

Jumping The Broom dates back to a period of time in American History when African people were enslaved and therefore not able to be legally married. Slaves didn't own property or possess many household items, so when they would wed, they would literally jump over the broom to signify that they were married. This tradition can be traced back to an area of West Africa, now Ghana, where the couple would jump over the broom to ward off evil spirits and *brush the slate clean*.

Today Jumping the Broom still symbolizes a new beginning and sweeping away of the past, and can also signify the joining of two families while offering a respectful nod to family ancestry.

To learn more about this tradition, check out this [website](#).



Iman and Charlie Jump the Broom during their wedding this last September

## NOVEMBER & DECEMBER 2023 DEI Calendar

### NOVEMBER

NATIVE AMERICAN INDIAN/ALASKA  
NATIVE HERITAGE MONTH

1

Día de Muertos

8

NFC DEI Council Meeting

11

Veteran's Day

12

Diwali begins

23

Thanksgiving

25

International Day for the Elimination  
of Violence Against Women

### DECEMBER

1

World AIDS Day

3

International Day for Persons  
with Disabilities

7

Pearl Harbor Day

7

Hanukkah begins

10

Human Rights Day

13

NFC DEI Council Meeting

25

Christmas

26

Kwanzaa begins

## DID YOU KNOW?



In a LinkedIn study, companies with a DEI team were 22% more likely to be seen as "an industry-leading company with high-caliber talent" and 12% more likely to be seen as an "inclusive workplace for people of diverse backgrounds."



# NAVRATRI...dates, facts, and significance

## A HINDU FESTIVAL CELEBRATING THE GODDESS DURGA

BY PUNAM ALAM (NFC ALUMNI)

My family hails from Gujarat (in North West India) and the Gujarati celebration is renowned for traditional dancing to folk and sometimes modern Bollywood music. People dance in concentric circles around the statue of Goddess Durga and/or a diya (oil/ghee lamp). The dancing, called Garba, varies in speed depending on the music which is usually played live, but could also be pre-recorded. The dance varies in complexity too and it can be a simple thran tali (three claps with some footwork) or have more intricate hand and feet movements. I like to affectionately call Navratri the biggest dance party in the world. I included a picture from the celebration which takes place in Vadodara (a/k/a Baroda) – the part of Gujarat where my family is from. I've read articles stating there may be up to 30,000 people in attendance at this particular venue. Celebrating Navratri in Vadodara is on my bucket list.



Beyond Navratri, Garba and Raas are also part of the dancing that takes place during the Sangeet (pre-wedding celebration) in Gujarati families. The festival is meant to celebrate the triumph of good over evil and to honor the Goddess Durga who represents protection, strength, motherhood, destruction and war. It is celebrated for nine nights and ten days to represent the different reincarnations of the Goddess. Depending on the region of India, other people may also celebrate and honor other Gods and Goddesses during this festival (there's a scene in Never Have I Ever showing how some South Indians celebrate). The traditional clothes worn by Gujarati women are called chaniya choli and men wear a keriyu. The clothes are colorful and may be adorned with sequins, shells, mirrors, beads, and other intricate work. I included a picture of my daughter wearing a chaniya choli and my son a keriyu. They're usually not this serious-looking.



Gujaratis also play Raas during this time which is another form of dance where you and a partner stand across from each other and hold one or two sticks, called dandiya, and dance. I guess you can say it is sort of like square dancing, but instead of a square you're in a parallel line and if one person jumps out, it will mess everyone up because you have to have an even number of people playing at all times and have at least two or more people. And yes, sometimes you get hit with the stick on your hand when your partner misses the hit to your stick and gets your hand instead. Honestly, my description of Raas does not do it justice, if you're curious to know what it looks like feel free to Youtube "Garba Raas Dance."



Navratri 2023 began on Sunday, October 15 and ended with Vijaya Dasami celebration on Tuesday, October 24.

Dates change each year based on the lunar calendar.



*"There's so much more to the celebration, but my favorite part of the festival is that it celebrates and honors an all-powerful female who wears many different hats, just like many of us women do." -Punam*



COLORS  
OF  
SHARAD  
NAVRATRI

Day 1 (10/15/23) - Orange  
Day 2 (10/16/23) - White  
Day 3 (10/17/23) - Red  
Day 4 (10/18/23) - Royal Blue  
Day 5 (10/19/23) - Yellow

Day 6 (10/20/23) - Green  
Day 7 (10/21/23) - Grey  
Day 8 (10/22/23) - Purple  
Day 9 (10/23/23) - Peacock Green





# SPOTLIGHT:

## Meet Two Dominican-American Authors Who Have Redefined American Literature

BY JULIE ALARCÓN



*Julia Alvarez is the author of How the García Girls Lost Their Accents, In the Time of the Butterflies, ¡Yo!, In the Name of Salomé, Saving the World, Afterlife, Homecoming, The Other Side/ El Otro Lado, The Woman I Kept to Myself, nonfiction Something to Declare, Once Upon A Quinceañera, and A Wedding in Haiti, and books for young readers (including the Tía Lola Stories series, Before We Were Free, finding miracles, Return to Sender and Where Do They Go?). She has been the recipient of the Pura Belpré Award and Américas Awards for her books for young readers, the Hispanic Heritage Award, and the F. Scott Fitzgerald Award, and the National Medal of Arts from President Obama.*



### I, Too, Sing América

I know it's been said before  
but not in this voice  
of the plátano  
and the mango,  
marimba y bongó,  
not in this sancocho  
of inglés  
con español.

Ay sí,  
it's my turn  
to oh say  
what I see,  
I'm going to sing America!  
with all América  
inside me:  
from the soles  
of Tierra del Fuego  
to the thin waist  
of Chiriquí  
up the spine of the Mississippi  
through the heartland  
of the Yanquis  
to the great plain face of Canada  
—  
all of us  
singing America,  
the whole hemispheric

familia  
belting our canción,  
singing our brown skin  
into that white  
and red and blue song —  
the big song  
that sings  
all America,  
el canto  
que cuenta  
con toda América:  
un new song!

Ya llegó el momento,  
our moment  
under the sun —  
ese sol that shines  
on everyone.

So, hit it maestro!  
give us that Latin beat,  
¡Uno-dos-tres!  
One-two-three!  
Ay sí,  
(y bilingually):  
Yo también soy América  
I, too, am America.

### Our Story

Our story is an epic, a saga, an odyssey. We crossed continents and oceans. And every time there was no way, we made a way. We are the children of bridges, bridges made from our backs, our tears, our sacrifices and from all the ones who never made it across with us.

We in the Latino community are among the greatest heroes our world has known. And yet despite all we do and all we are, we find ourselves attacked and demonized and endangered, not just in this country but all over the world communities like ours are under assault.

And this is why we cannot just survive or live. We have to fight for justice. We have to fight for equality.

All of us must be free  
All of us must be free  
All of us must be free, or none.



*Juno Díaz is the author of Drown, The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, which won the 2008 Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award, and This Is How You Lose Her. He has been the recipient of a MacArthur "Genius" Fellowship, PEN/Malamud Award, Dayton Literary Peace Prize, Guggenheim Fellowship, and PEN/O. Henry Award.*



# Being an UPSTANDER at NFC...

## UNCOVERING AND UNDERSTANDING THE 4 D'S



BY RACHEL MANNE

As many of you know, our NFC training team delivers hundreds of workplace trainings to our clients each year. The trainings range from our standard anti-harassment and discrimination training to our increasingly popular workplace investigations training. If you ask our trainers, though, one of our most impactful topics is “How to be an Upstander in the Workplace.” This topic, which stemmed from state law training requirements on “bystander intervention” is not particularly “legal” in nature. Rather, it focuses on what small (or large) steps can each member of a workforce take to support others and increase a feeling of inclusion. It underscores that not everyone feels comfortable speaking up for themselves and that we rely on others to support us along the way. In addition, this training works towards increasing awareness of our blind spots -- in a respectful way.

There are many reasons why employees prefer to stay quiet: too busy to get involved, fear of reprisal, non-confrontational personalities, not knowing what to say, assuming it is not one's place to get involved, and the list goes on and on. To be fair, there may be situations when the type of Upstander action may need to be considered and adjusted. But, as we as we begin to close down 2023 and look towards 2024, I thought it would be a perfect time for each of to reflect for a moment on how we can increase our Upstander conduct at NFC, even in small ways. NFC is already a wonderful place to work, but each and every one of us can make it even better.

In order to do that, I thought I would highlight some of the Upstander tactics that our training team uses in our client trainings. We often refer to this as the “4 Ds”: **Direct, Delay, Delegate, Distract**. Here is an explanation about them:

**Direct:** Immediately calling out inappropriate behavior when it occurs. This could be publicly, if the situation calls for it, or privately, but the purpose of direct intervention is to handle the situation right away. Sometimes this is the most uncomfortable of the options, but it is important to consider if you think the situation warrants it.

**Delay:** Not calling out the behavior in the moment, but rather, following up with the impacted employee after the incident to check in and show support. This can be in person or by email/Teams chat. You may also consider following up with the “wrongdoer” after the fact to ensure that this individual understood what they may have done and how their conduct was viewed.



**Delegate:** Reaching out to someone else on the team who you think may be better positioned to intervene. This could be a more senior member of the team or a peer who may have a close relationship with the players involved. While some view this as avoidance, I view this as an excellent option that may help.

**Distract:** Interrupting an uncomfortable moment by changing the topic or focus of the conversation. Asking follow up questions or providing additional data on the subject may also be a distraction tool (and one which increases awareness).

As you can see, there are some simple tools that we can use here at NFC to increase our Upstander behaviors. I encourage everyone to make it their personal goal in 2024 to transform themselves from bystanders to upstanders in the workplace!

# MANAGING HIGH EXPECTATIONS

*a spotlight on ...COCO GAUFF*

COURTESY OF BLUE OCEAN BRAIN

When Coco Gauff was just six years old, she realized just how “right” a tennis racquet felt in her hands. Days on the public courts near her home in Delray Beach, Florida, became weeks, and weeks morphed into months. Fast forward nine years, and Gauff achieved her famous 2019 defeat of tennis legend Venus Williams in round one of Wimbledon. In that time, dedication, drive, and family helped Gauff grow into the player she is today.

The genes of Gauff’s parents, Corey and Candi, may have had something to do with her success. Both collegiate athletes, they shined in their sports (football and track, respectively). Her grandfather, Eddie “Red” Odom, is a local football and Little League coaching legend. But a much more likely contributor is the mentality that the family instilled in their home.

In a Bleacher Report article, Gauff explained her approach to improving her skillset was tied to her grandfather’s mantra: “Learn from your losses. Forget your wins.” She practiced tirelessly and challenged herself endlessly, wanting to “play up” and never shying away from an opportunity to improve. But becoming a successful and skilled player is one thing; staying grounded on and off the court is another. And this, too, is where Gauff serves as inspiration. She acknowledges the importance of staying level-headed, poised, and humble. Players, spectators, and those looking up to her as a role model notice these qualities as well.



## Family and Focus

The foundation of Gauff’s success comes from a strong family bond. The family prays together before her matches—for both her and the other player. They remember to have fun. Her parents encourage her to stay the course, noticing that growth is the most important thing. “The results will come,” they tell her, also reminding her of an important life lesson: that joy is being in and relishing the moment.

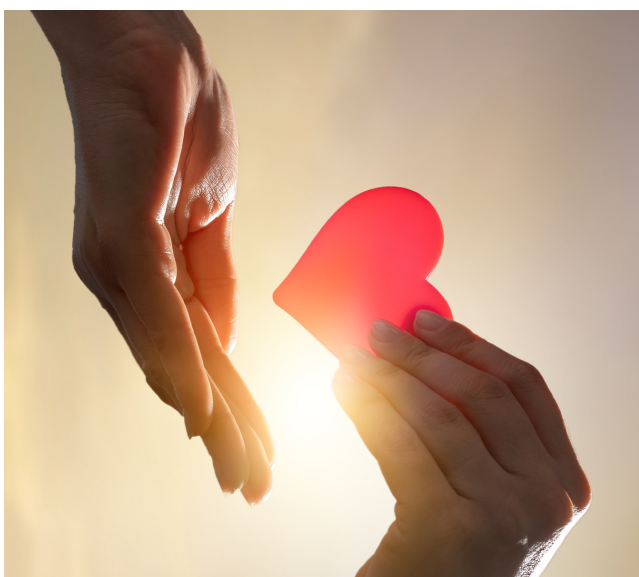
That’s not to say she’s not competitive. On the contrary, Gauff won’t leave the practice court until she masters something. Her goal? “To be the best of all time.” But her family helps her to keep her head in the game in the most mindful of ways, reminding her not to overcomplicate things as she plays. Her mom has taught Gauff how to take a moment through an established routine, designed to get back into the moment: Go to her towel, breathe, and tune out the crowd.

When faced with the high expectations of early success, Gauff remembers where she has come from and always considers the sacrifices her family has made. This awareness helps keep her grounded no matter what surface she’s on.

In another sign of Gauff’s success, she partnered with her sponsor, shoe manufacturer New Balance, and became the first woman with her own signature tennis shoe.

[Click here for full article on NFC’s branded Blue Ocean Brain site.](#)

## P E R S P E C T I V E :



## A TEAM MEMBER’S THOUGHTS ON... GIVING BACK

BY TRISHA LAYDEN

Like all of you reading this, my thoughts, heart, and prayers go out to those who have been affected by the seemingly increasing disasters that are taking place across the globe. Be it an earthquake, flood, war, conflict, crisis, or wildfire, unimaginable devastations are everywhere.

If you are interested in donating to a cause but would first like to learn how they have been ranked and vetted, please visit the list below (courtesy of <https://www.charitynavigator.org/>).

- [Afghanistan Earthquake](#)
- [Flooding in Libya](#)
- [Humanitarian Crisis in Israel and Gaza](#)
- [Morocco Earthquake](#)
- [Hawaii Wildfires](#)
- [Ukrainian-Russian Crisis](#)

Find out [more about a charity](#) that aligns with your passions and values.



# S A Z Ó N

## LIVINGSTON'S FIRST LATINO/HISPANIC HERITAGE MONTH CELEBRATION

BY CORASÍ CAICEDO

### The Great Idea

Jessica Aldana had a great idea for a Latino/Hispanic celebration. Aldana, a Livingston High School Senior of Mexican descent, saw how various communities in Livingston had events that celebrated their pride and heritage. As a result, she set out to organize one for her own community.

### Some Background

Latino/Hispanic Heritage in the United States is celebrated from September 15th – October 15th and recognizes the contributions and influence of Hispanic Americans to the history, culture, and achievements of the United States. This celebration was established by National Hispanic Heritage Week in legislation signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson in 1968. At first only celebrated for a week, in 1988, it was expanded to a month and signed into law by President Ronald Reagan.

September 15 was chosen as the starting date because it is the anniversary of the Cry of Dolores (September 16, 1810), which marked the start of the Mexican War of Independence and thus resulted (in 1821) in independence for the New Spain Colony (now Mexico and the Central American nations of Guatemala, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Honduras, and Nicaragua), which became the Federal Republic of Central America.

The 30-day period also includes many dates of importance in the Hispanic community, when many countries celebrate their anniversaries of independence.

Against this background, it's notable that Livingston Township has a growing Latino population.

With that in mind, Aldana began the extensive planning for the event. She named it "sazón", meaning "seasoning" in Spanish. She states that the reasoning behind the name comes from the energy the Hispanic community brings to the town aka the flavor we spread.



### The Planning

The event planning involved lots of people and groups, including the Latina Moms of Livingston Facebook group led by Jessica's mom, Lorena Aldana, Assembly candidate Rosaura Bagolie, and resident Zumba instructor and life of the party, Laura Tamayo (the author's soon-to-be mother-in-law). They handled everything from locale reservation, advertising, hiring restaurants and dance troupes, creating activities for the kids, and more! The event was held on October 21st, 2023.

### The Celebration

The purpose of this event was to provide a place for the Latino community to gather and share a piece of their culture with everyone. Each participating country had a table with facts about the culture, food, drinks, instruments, traditional dress, etc.



The attendees received a "passport" to bring to each table, where they could learn about a country, and receive a "stamp" for their passport to prove they visited.

The highlight of the event was the various dance presentations. Ms. Tamayo, who is of indigenous Peruvian descent, taught the children how to dance the traditional Andean dance called valicha [\[see video here\]](#), while dressed in the traditional clothing worn by Andean women. Further, a professional dance troupe presented a northern Peruvian dance called la marinera [\[see video here\]](#). Every move set the floor on fire!

The day ended with a mariachi band playing classic Mexican corridos, and everyone joined in for a dance free-for-all. Everyone was exhausted (in a good way) at the end of the day. Though this was the first Latino Heritage celebration Livingston had seen, it was not the last! We will be back fiercer, better, and with more sazón next year!



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