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Passion Meets Purpose for Alumnus in Community Development

January 6, 2011

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Illinois Wesleyan University alumnus Juan Salgado '91 has conversed with the presidents of nations, worked closely with heads of major corporations, and been honored by the city of Chicago. Yet for Salgado, the work he does as the CEO of the Instituto del Progreso Latino is all simply part of doing what he loves.



Juan Salgado and his family gathered at a Minority Alumni Network event at Illinois Wesleyan.

"You never know where the work you do will take you," said Salgado. "You just have to stay grounded and do something for which you have a passion."

The Instituto, which Salgado has led since 2001, creates educational and workforce opportunities for Latino communities in Chicago. The not-for-profit was given an Award of Excellence from the U.S. Department of Labor in 2008, and in 2009 the Instituto was selected as the National Council of La Raza's Affiliate of the Year.

Instituto's mission is close to Salgado's heart. Growing up in Calumet Park, Ill., he lived in a mostly white, working class neighborhood with pockets of long-standing Latino families. "My grandfather moved there from Mexico in 1918, and we grew up a block away from where my grandfather settled. So we had been there for almost a century," said Salgado, who noted the neighborhood went through the phenomenon known as suburban flight, when many families moved to the suburbs. "By the time I went through high school, there were very few white families left," he said. With resources being channeled to other communities, Salgado watched his neighborhood's opportunities fade. "Even from a young age, it was already in my mind that I wanted to work with working class communities, promoting upward mobility and job formation in neighborhoods," he said.

That desire to improve his community took Salgado to Illinois Wesleyan where he graduated with a degree in economics. Speaking with Robert S. Eckley Distinguished Professor of Economics Mike Seeborg, and Professor Emerita of Economics Margaret Chapman, Salgado discovered the potential of matching his degree to his dreams. "I had no idea what urban planning was, but Dr. Seeborg and Dr. Chapman explained what I could do," he said. Seeborg connected Salgado with students at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (U of I) who were working on an urban planning project in East St. Louis, Ill. Salgado won a graduate fellowship to study at U of I, where he earned a master's degree in urban planning in 1993.

For the next several years, Salgado worked for Chicago-area efforts, such as the Citizens Information Service and the Resurrection Project, which focused on building communities through affordable housing, day care and construction cooperatives. All the while, he volunteered for Instituto.

In 2001, he became the executive director of the Instituto, followed in 2008 with a promotion to CEO. "It's an organization that focuses on education and upward mobility. It was perfect fit for the kinds of things that interested me," said Salgado.

During his time with Instituto, Salgado has spearheaded workforce development initiatives with private industry and universities in Chicago, including a program to help Latino residents become licensed practical nurses. "These people will go from earning \$10 an hour to earning \$24-\$27 an hour, and fill an immediate need in the healthcare industry," said Salgado. More than 200 residents already have graduated as Licensed Practical Nurses with another 700 residents in the educational pipeline to do the same. The Instituto expanded the opportunities for younger residents in 2009 with the opening of a new charter school, Instituto Health Sciences Career Academy, which works in conjunction with Chicago area schools, Rush University and National-Louis University. "We're developing the next generation of doctors, chemists and biologists," said Salgado.

Instituto has also connected residents with manufacturing jobs in a partnership with area industry and the City of Chicago, known as the Chicago Workforce Center for Manufacturing, or Manufacturing Works. "We wanted to take the experience we had and make it happen on a citywide level," said Salgado. "The city was interested in creating a workforce center that specializes in being able to serve the manufacturer and serve those looking for jobs in manufacturing and make those matches a reality." As a result of Manufacturing Works, Salgado received a Recognition Award in 2008 from Mayor Richard M. Daley for his leadership and commitment to immigrant integration.

The work of Salgado has caught the attention of more than Mayor Daley. Three years ago, he received a call from a board member of Instituto, asking him to join a group of people advising Mexico's President Felipe Calderon on the state of Mexican immigrants in the U.S. "I come from Mexican descent, and I work in the heart of a Mexican community. Our organization does a lot with the Mexican community," said Salgado. "It felt like a natural connection to sit down with the [Mexican] president's cabinet and express our thoughts and advice."

Salgado's thoughts have been sought by many groups, from introducing then-Senator Barack Obama at the May Day march for immigration rights in 2006, to addressing more than 250 U.S and Mexican leaders on immigration in 2008. He has also been selected as a fellow of the 2007 and 2009 Aspen Institute Ideas Festival, joining top decision-makers, journalists, artists, policy experts and government officials from across the globe. When asked about his accolades, Salgado brushes away any individual attention. "The truth of the matter is when you head something you end up being the focus, but it is mainly the reflection of the kind of environment that is created by fostering the talents and creativity of those around you," he said.

Though he works from time to time with the Illinois Wesleyan Minority Alumni Network, Salgado said he hopes to take a greater part in the University that offered him direction when he needed it. Visiting last spring, he expressed his amazement at the growing diversity on campus, and the enthusiasm of the students. "When I heard [the students] speak, it was clear to me that they were leaving Wesleyan with a lot of confidence, a belief in their ability to relate with each other despite differences," he said. "That's a quality that's tough for a student to acquire outside of a setting like Wesleyan. It's the intimacy that challenges you."

Of all his experiences, Salgado said his greatest lesson came from his time at Illinois Wesleyan. "It was at Wesleyan I learned you have to get relationships right. I've carried that with me."

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