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## Seminar Explores Domestic Violence, Promotes Zero Tolerance

By Peter Schweitzer

[Clearwater, FL] – Stereotypical myths of Hispanic culture, such as the notion that “All Latinos beat their wives” or “Latinas like to be beaten” aren’t just offensive. They’re “internalized oppression,” according to Patricia Castillo, a social worker and executive director of the PEACE Initiative. PEACE stands for Putting an End to Abuse through Community Efforts.

“Domestic violence is a detriment to the access of power at all levels. It is a way to keep Latinos powerless,” she told a group of local Hispanic leaders who gathered Saturday at the Belleview Biltmore Resort & Spa for a conference on domestic violence in the Hispanic community.

“When we buy into those myths, it keeps us powerless,” she said. “Others want us to be fighting each other so we can’t get power.”

The meeting was part of the weekend’s statewide convention of the League of United Latin American Citizens, commonly known as LULAC. About 30 people participated in the event, sponsored by Proyecto La Luz, or Project Light. The project brought together Tracfone Wireless and the National Women’s Commission of LULAC to provide cell phones to victims of domestic violence.

Recently, the National Latino Alliance for the Elimination of Domestic Violence, or Alianza in Spanish, joined the project as part of its own campaign to raise awareness of the devastating effects such violence has on Hispanic families and communities.

The goal of the project is to ensure that domestic violence victims have cell phones so that they are able to call for assistance when faced with an emergency situation.

“Domestic violence is an important issue in the Latino community. It touches on other issues such as immigration and human trafficking. It’s difficult and challenging work,” said Gabriela D. Lemus, the event moderator, who has a doctorate in international studies and is director of policy and legislation for LULAC.

During her introductory remarks, Lemus noted that pending legislation in Congress will impact the domestic violence issue and the Hispanic community as a whole.

“The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) is up for reauthorization and needs to be approved especially since immigration laws are getting stricter,” she said.

“VAWA ensures battered immigrant women a way to leave their abuser and keep their immigration status if they so choose.”

The meeting featured several expert panelists on domestic violence in the Hispanic community.

Castillo, a member of Alianza’s board of directors, argued that it takes both men and women to combat the forces that keep domestic violence alive.

“If we work together, both men and women, to stop this violence, it’s an act of defiance because when we choose to act with our heart and our mind instead of with violence, it’s going against the grain of society.”

Castillo has worked for the past 25 years in different aspects of domestic violence prevention.

“In my 25 years of work, I never had a victim come to me and ask for better housing or a better lawyer,” she said. “They always ask for one thing. They want the violence to stop.”

Another panelist, Minerva Figueroa, a training specialist with the Florida Coalition Against Domestic Violence, focused her remarks on the cultural aspect of domestic violence in the Hispanic community.

“We must respect the cultural diversity of the victim. Culture plays an important role. A Latina woman’s strength must be validated. We don’t need to make judgments about the culture of the battered woman. We need to meet her where she’s at. This is all part of the cultural competence we must work at to better serve the battered woman.”

The panelists urged participants to work together to raise the level of consciousness about domestic violence, disseminate information about victim rights and resources, and take a position of no tolerance concerning violence in the home.

According to Castillo, “Domestic violence is never about love or respect. It’s rampant in our society. We’re even seeing it among teens. Domestic violence is a learned behavior. We pass it on from one generation to another through observation. We learn to do what we see every day.”

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