

# THE CHICAGO REPORTER



Homero Tristan, an attorney, is a 2004 graduate of UNO's leadership training program, the Metropolitan Leadership Institute. (Photo by Jason Reblando)

## Getting in

By: Casey Sanchez

In the fall of 2003, Mayor Richard M. Daley spent an hour in a closed-room session fielding the questions of some 20 young Latino professionals---nearly all previous strangers.

In varying accounts of the night, the mayor was either so taken aback by the candid inquiries, or alternately, so enraptured with the flow of the Q&A, that he invited the Latino professionals to come back to his office in City Hall and meet with him in two smaller groups.

The young Hispanic lawyers, managers, political go-getters and entrepreneurs were invited to chat with the mayor as part of their participation in the Metropolitan Leadership Institute, commonly known by its initials: MLI.

The institute is a five-year-old spin-off project of the United Neighborhood Organization, known as UNO, and has been supported through contributions from The Chicago Community Trust and Anheuser-Busch.

So what did they talk about with the mayor? MLI students and grads remain tight-lipped

on the matter.

Some MLI members have taken a verbal confidentiality pledge not to reveal the contents of the training discussions.

“What goes on there, stays there,” said Alejo Torres, 28, senior outreach program manager for the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago and current MLI student.

Several graduates said it allowed them to openly discuss the realities of the workplace, how power and influence are actually acquired in both personal relationships and political dealings.

“I don’t think there’s anything clandestine about it,” said 1st Ward Alderman Manuel “Manny” Flores, who attended MLI’s inaugural class while running for office in 2003. “People want to be able to have frank and candid discussions.”

For young Latino professionals seeking to get a leg up in the corporate world or get a head start at finding a job in city government, it’s quickly becoming the hottest ticket in town.

Its recent alumni have already leveraged their skills and contacts to modest successes.

Richard Rodriguez, who graduated from MLI in 2005, was recently appointed by Daley to head the city’s Department of Construction and Permits.

Lizveth Mendez, a 2004 MLI grad, was hired as the Latino liaison for Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan.

Her classmate Pedro De Jesus was voted one of the Business Leaders of Color in 2005 by Chicago United, a group that promotes corporate diversity. In 2004, he ran against incumbent state Rep. Maria Antonia “Toni” Berrios in a Logan Square district.

Eduardo Garza, a young upstart challenger running for the Southwest Side’s 12th District seat against state Sen. Martin A. Sandoval and backed by 22nd Ward Alderman Ricardo Munoz, is also a recent graduate of MLI.

Cesar Santoy, a 2004 grad, recently became executive director of the Hispanic American Construction Industry Association.

The private meeting with the mayor was but one night in a year-long MLI program. And even MLI is but one part of UNO’s nonprofit endeavors, which range from running charter grammar schools to installing bathtub rails in the homes of the Latino elderly.

But it’s not an unusual picture of how UNO has taken an axiom of grassroots organizing and turned it on its head by forging relationships with powerful people.

To get in, potential students submit an application, undergo an hour-long interview with leaders of UNO and pay \$500 in tuition, if they are accepted.

What UNO gets out of it, Executive Director Juan Rangel says, is, “Our ability to act is enhanced when we have a slew of relations that we can call on or work with on a given moment on a given issue. It’s going to be based on self-interest on their end, on our end.”

Rangel stresses that the demands of the office workplace are not unlike the demands placed on community organizers. Employees must learn how to juggle and deal with power and self-interests to become successful.

“From small-town America to the big city, politics trumps business,” says Jorge Perez, an MLI grad and president of the Calumet Area Industrial Commission.

MLI trainings are not for every type of leader.

“It’s not for people who believe change will come from protesting outside City Hall,” said Homero Tristan, an MLI graduate and co-founder of the law firm Tristan Ports, LLC.

For anyone who’s ever trained as a community or union organizer, there’s a whiff of the familiar, even if the surroundings are more upscale.

“It’s no different than Saul Alinsky and the community organizers of understanding power and understanding self-interest and understanding relationships, but as it applies to this group of people,” said Rangel, who refers to MLI as a “no-bullshit assessment of the public arena.”

MLI puts its young professional charges through the rigor of an Alinsky-led training session normally given to community and union organizers. What is power? Who do you know who is powerful? What is their self-interest? What are your self-interests? How do you navigate politics to advance your agenda?

Where this rule normally applies to poor people gaining access to the powerbrokers, UNO focuses on training young, successful Latinos to seek power and opportunities in civic life.

“Our upbringing is to do everything right. Go to college. Don’t join gangs. Get a job,” said Perez. “Once you’ve completed grad school, that’s it. There’s no leadership plan for how to deal with corporate America.”

Several MLI students described the sessions as refreshing. It was the first time they could speak openly in a professional setting about class divisions among Latinos, about feeling ostracized from their community for having succeeded in the corporate world.

“If we follow the logic, these are the guys that really should be the real role models of our

community---all our rhetoric about education and these kids having a good future,” Rangel said. “This is it. This is what we want for them. Why wouldn’t we want to engage them? The tragedy is somehow they are dismissed.”

But, as De Jesus chides, the organization teaches Latino professionals how to join the public sphere, not how to run a political campaign. “You’re making it more practical than it is,” De Jesus said.

Still, a few of his MLI cohorts joined him on his campaign for state representative.

Since many MLI students have achieved their success in circles outside of city government, some know of UNO’s connection to City Hall, some don’t and others have only rumors to guide them.

“There’s a perception out there that the only Latinos who work with mayor are [members of the Hispanic Democratic Organization]. Then how are all these Latino professionals with no political affiliations sitting down with the mayor?” said Perez. “There’s a misconception out there that [UNO] is a bad group. Enron was a bad group. This is a community group.”

Still, for those who hail from activist and independent political circles, joining MLI can mean getting warnings and chidings from their friends and spouses about UNO’s cozy relationship to City Hall.

“My wife gave me a hard time about it,” said Garza.

*Jeff Kelly Lowenstein, Frank Life and Sean Redmond helped research this article*