

Veteran Says Latinas Need To Stick Together.

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Empowerment Event Hosted by La Fonda

As a child growing up in a small barrio in Laredo, Texas, Consuelo Castillo Kickbusch would peek through the windows at Sears and marvel at the clothes on hangers that were beyond her reach.

"I remember my mother pulling my little hand back and saying, 'No se puede (It's not possible) ...' If it comes on a hanger, it's new and it's expensive," Kickbusch said.

But her mother told her not to give up. She told her to study so that she wouldn't be left behind.

Kickbusch followed the advice and eventually rose through the ranks of the U.S. Army, earning a promotion to lieutenant colonel. At the time, she was the highest-ranking Hispanic woman in combat support. She has since started her own company in San Antonio and written a book titled "Journey to the Future."

On Saturday morning, the retired officer turned motivational speaker shared her story with the 130 people attending the National Hispana Leadership Institute's Latinas Empowerment Conference held at La Fonda. She told them that the whole point of being a leader is to give back and help others move ahead.

She said that in her quest for the car that didn't have to be pushed and the house with the real windows instead of foil, she lost her way.

"I just wanted to be the best so that everyone would say, 'She did it,'" Kickbusch said. "What happens when you get to the top, when you look back? That's the real sad part. When you look back and you haven't brought anyone up. What does that say about you? What does that say about what you're really about?"

Kickbusch said she kept earning medals, and the outside world saw her as a success and called her a role model.

"I wasn't," she said. "I wanted more, and so, when is enough enough?"

She also told her audience that Latinas need to come together and help one another, instead of putting each other down because of where they come from.

"Make room for all of our sisters," she said.

Kickbusch, who became a motivational speaker in 1996, recalled a conversation with her father in her early teen years. She said she was talking to him about being poor when he turned to her and said, "You are not poor. You are rich. You have culture; you have values; you have tradition."

She credited her parents with the successes she's achieved.

"They did things, and they never made the connection on how much they gave us ..." she said. "How sad that they gave up everything -- career, choices, status, power, positions -- to give us their dream."

The empowerment conference was the first organized in New Mexico by the National Hispana Leadership Institute, which is based in Arlington, Va.