

IN THE NEWS

HISPANIC CHAMBER REWARDS TOP BUSINESSES

Ben Cunningham
The Grand Rapids Press
March 2, 2005

A CELEBRATION OF HISPANIC BUSINESS



PRESS PHOTO/JON M. BROUWER

Having a good time: From left, Tom Almonte, Armando Hernandez and Ruben Garcia Jr. share a light moment at the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce banquet Tuesday night. Hernandez was honored as the Latino of the Year.

Hispanic Chamber rewards top businesses

BY BEN CUNNINGHAM
THE GRAND RAPIDS PRESS

GRAND RAPIDS — If only all board meetings could be this much fun.

The West Michigan Hispanic Chamber of Commerce held its first awards banquet Tuesday, at the same time announcing its new board.

While nearly 200 guests dined on traditional Mexican fare at Grand Rapids' Tequila Restaurant, a mariachi band serenaded the fiesta.

But it's not all fun and games. Founded in June 2004, the WMHCC spends its fair share of time conducting serious business.

With about 70 members, its goal is "to increase the economic advance-

ment of Hispanic-owned businesses in West Michigan," according to Executive President Dina Gonzalez.

The group sponsors a Hispanic Business Expo each fall, as well as periodic workshops on licensing, financing and marketing for Hispanic entrepreneurs.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau's most recent statistics, there are more than 37 million Hispanics in the United States. It is the fastest-growing ethnic group in the country.

However, in 2002, about 21 percent of Hispanics were living in poverty, compared to less than 8 percent of non-Hispanic whites.

It is trends such as these the WMHCC seeks to overturn by advancing privately owned Hispanic

businesses.

The group's constituency spans north to Muskegon, west to Holland and as far east as Saginaw and Flint.

"We are a young group that is growing and working together," Gonzalez said.

New board members include Oswaldo Garces of Clean-Tech, Elissa Suarez of YMCA Grand Rapids, Ramon Berlanga of Fifth Third Bank, Tom Almonte of the City of Grand Rapids, Sandra Ramos of Chemical Bank, Richard Ortega of Alternative Mechanics, Rob Wagely of Regent Broadcasting, Bob Clarkson of Davenport University and Laura Angulo with Telamon Corp.

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THE LIST

The winners

The West Michigan Hispanic Chamber of Commerce hosted its first annual awards banquet Tuesday. The winners included:

Latino of the Year: Armando Hernandez of Bank One

Latina of the Year: Eleanor Lopez of Holland Community Hospital

Business of the Year: Primera Plastics

Honorable Mention Business of the Year: Clean-Tech

Most Promising Business of the Year: Alternative Mechanical



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