



Maria Aybar

Throughout HISPANIC HERITAGE MONTH, CTI will feature profiles of local Hispanic leaders to celebrate [#LowellHispanicExcellence](#) by learning about their experiences, perspectives, and the wisdom they share in our local communities.

**Hispanic Heritage Month 9/15-10/15
An Interview with MARIA AYBAR**

Nominated by **Karonika Pholy Brown**, Career Coach, Financial Education Center, CTI

What is your title/organization and/or involvement in the community, and what accomplishment are you most proud of?

- My name is Maria Aybar, and I am the Director of Operations and helped found the Latinx Community Center for Empowerment (LCCE). A nonprofit seeking to empower the Latinx Community through education to promote their socioeconomic development. Besides my role directing some of our programs, I am also a board member for Do It Yourself (DIY) Lowell, Middlesex Community College Alumni Board, the Greely Peace Scholars at UMASS Lowell, and the Community Development Block Grant Funding Advisory Committee.
- I am most proud of contributing to the creation of the first Latinx archive in the city of Lowell and one of the very few in Massachusetts, as well as the first Latinx and Hispanic Festival (this year is our second year!).

What does Hispanic Heritage Month mean to you?

- To me, Hispanic Heritage Month is about celebrating our contributions, remembering our ancestors, acknowledging the devastating impact of systemic oppression, and reimagining new possibilities for our community.

What was one of the most difficult obstacles you have had to overcome?

- I grew up undocumented and one of the many obstacles I faces was accessing higher education. As undocumented and low income, I encountered a variety of financial barriers as I journeyed through public higher education. I could not apply for financial aid because I did not qualify due to my status. I had to pay twice the cost of tuition at community college since I was considered a foreign student. Because I was only taking six credits since that was all my mom could afford, I only qualified for one scholarship at my community college. Most

scholarships require students to have at least nine credits. These barriers did not deter me from accomplishing my dream of getting an education but rather fueled my desire and commitment. After 3 years at community college, a presidential scholarship opened up. I applied with the help of various staff and faculty who wrote me letters of recommendation and assisted with my essay. I was awarded the scholarship allowing me to graduate within a year. Due to my college and community involvement as well as excellent academics, I was selected as commencement speaker. That same year, I received a full ride to attend Amherst College where I pursued a double major in Political Science and Latinx and Latin American Studies. I graduated from Amherst in December 2019. Two years ago, I received my lawful permanent residency, and a year ago I went back to school for my masters. At Brandeis University, I am pursuing a dual master's in Public Policy with a concentration on Economic and Racial Equity, and an MBA on a full ride.

In your leadership role, how do you actively promote inclusivity and equity?

- In my leadership, I always try to think about the groups that are not represented at the table, and how they can be included. For instance, through the Hispanic and Latinx festivals, we try to bring to our audience a diverse representation of Latin America. Although we will always fall short due to the vastness of the region and the limited hours we have had at the festival, since its inception, we have tried to provide food, entertainment, and crafts from the Caribbean, and Central and South America. The committee has representation by Guatemala, DR, and Colombia and to promote inclusivity, this year, we included representatives from Brazil and PR.

What legacy do you hope to leave behind?

- I hope to leave behind a Lowell that is more humane.

Looking back on your leadership journey, what would you tell your younger self about embracing your identity and stepping into a leadership role with confidence?

- At times you will not find anybody that looks like you in the room, but please know your power is to be who you are. You do not have to accommodate anybody by changing your accent, relegating your native language to the private of your home, or molding your ideas to be more palatable to those in power. You know your truth, be yourself.

How has being Hispanic influenced your work and your life?

- I work with the Latinx community because I understand the hardships that come with migrating to a new country, such as lacking language skills, missing your family/community, and poor knowledge about community resources and your rights. Therefore, through my work at LCCE and other spaces, I seek to create programs and build coalitions seeking to mitigate those issues.

What experiences or individuals have been your biggest sources of inspiration in your journey as a leader?

- My experience as experience forever changed my worldview. It mobilized to action and inspired me to be a voice I was not hearing in my community.

What can the community do more to recognize Hispanic heritage throughout the year?

- Host events in collaboration with the community. For instance host Concerts, exhibitions, poetry, cultural dances etc..

What has been the most rewarding part of your commitment to the community?

- Seeing the Latinx community coming together has been the most rewarding part of my job. The term Latinx encapsulates a variety of races, ethnicities, and languages. For the most part, people try to stick with their ethnic group. Yet at LCCE, we have created events aiming at unifying and healing the community, and through our new initiative, the Lowell Latinx Archive, we are able to accomplish this unity. Our past event, called *Compartamos un Café* (Let's Share a Coffee) brought a presentation from Colombia, DR, PR, Guatemala, and El Salvador where we learned about how different countries use coffee to socialize and build trust and community. This event brought up dialogue and new connections.

How did you become inspired to make a difference in your community?

- My experiences as undocumented inspired me to make a difference in my community. Through education, I became knowledgeable about the systems that keep us oppressed and

What do you hope to accomplish in the future to further your positive impact?

- Expand the narrative around who are the Latinx peoples of Lowell.

What self-care practices do you prioritize to maintain resilience and well-being while navigating the challenges of leadership as a person of a marginalized identity?

- I connect with people close to me whom I know can provide mentorship and support in times of hardship and uncertainty.

In moments of doubt or facing setbacks, how do you draw upon the strength of your identity and experiences to persevere and stay true to your leadership vision?

- I think about my community and how they need me and others with similar experiences to persevere in our work.

What advice would you give to future leaders in the community, especially those who identify as Hispanic?

- To lift as we rise.

#LowellHispanicExcellence #CommunityLeader #Leadership #DElatCTI #HispanicHeritageMonth2023
#Appreciation #Grateful #diversity #equity #inclusion #CTIResponds