

## American dream, Dominican style

By DIANE HAINES

HERALD NEWS

Elsa Mantilla lives the American dream. She started out as a factory worker; now she's a successful business owner and one of the leaders of Paterson's Dominican community. She used to sell perfume and jewelry from her home on Broadway, and out of a shopping cart. Now she sells a variety of apparel and accessories at her bridal boutique.

"I cannot depend on only one thing," Mantilla says. "We do a little bit of everything; that is how we can survive here."

And when Mantilla says "everything," she means it: jewelry, shoes, perfume and gowns galore from the Rossy Elsie store at 368 21st Ave. in Paterson. In addition to catering to her customers' needs, Mantilla and her family help with immigration problems, give out free information on becoming a citizen and run voter registration drives. As a result of her community involvement, Mantilla has dozens of awards from law enforcement, political, civic and Latino organizations. Her store is the hub of all the activity. Metallic, jewel-toned sandals are piled high on tables. Costume jewelry sparkles in showcases. Gowns in a rainbow array of colors line the back wall. A small gray office holds three functional desks for Mantilla and her two daughters, Rosa and Elsa Elizabeth. Her husband, Francisco, also works in the business, which began in their home. Telephones ring incessantly.

The bustling shops that line 21st Avenue used to be dominated by Italian merchants, but recent years have brought change. Lampposts along the avenue display blue and gold flags; the stores and restaurants are run mostly by entrepreneurs from the Dominican Republic, Peru, Cuba, Colombia and Ecuador.

According to the 2000 Census, New Jersey's concentration of Dominicans is second only to New York's. Of Paterson's total population of 172,648, some 19,977 are Dominicans.

Mantilla was born in Higüey, a small town in the Dominican Republic.

"I consider I'm from a big family. I have 10 brothers and sisters," she says. She went to school in Santo Domingo and in June 1972, at 18, left for the United States carrying only about \$100 in cash. She went to live with her brother in the Bronx.

She got a job sewing dresses in a factory. A co-worker invited her to a baby shower. Her brother insisted on escorting her. It was there that she spotted her future husband and asked him, "Do you dance? Why you don't dance with me?"

Her brother was not happy, she recalls, because her dancing partner was from Ecuador, cautioning that, "If you get married, he'll take you there and we won't see you again." Ignoring that advice, she married in 1974 and moved to Paterson, where her husband's brother resides. Mantilla got another factory job but recalls thinking, "You can't live only making dresses," so she started selling things like perfume and jewelry and did very well. So well, in fact, that a building inspector found out she was operating a commercial business in an area zoned residential.

"Oh my God, what am I going to do? I have to have another place," she said.

She opened a store on 21st Avenue in 1981 and moved into a bigger space in 1984. In 1982, in addition to running the business, she became an American citizen and somehow found time to take classes at both Passaic County Community College and Bergen Community College.

Because of the large Dominican presence in Paterson, Mantilla became convinced that there was a need for a parade, so she became the founder and first president of the Dominican Parade and Festival of the State of New Jersey.

"I didn't know anything about running a parade," she says. But with the help of the Dominican community and city leaders, the first parade took place Sept. 10, 1989. It started at Vreeland Avenue and 33rd Street and ended at City Hall.

"We just used to go to City Hall and raise the flag. The parade has helped open a lot of doors for the community. I was the founder, and I can't let it go down. I think I'll fight for it."

Mantilla is also the founding president of Mujeres Latinas en Accion de New Jersey Inc. (Women United in Action for New Jersey), which raises scholarship money and attempts to open educational, business, cultural and social opportunities for Latina women.

She recently took a group of young women to visit Mayor Jose "Joey" Torres at City Hall.

"The mayor was so inspiring to them. He gave them the pin of the city and a proclamation," she says. "He treated them like adults. One of them may be inspired to become mayor or something important."

Mantilla recently was featured on the Paterson Web site (patersononline.net), created by Julio C. Tavarez.

"She came here with no English and she has succeeded in a world that was new to her," says Tavarez, who is also Dominican. "She is a leader in the community. She was one of the first Dominican immigrants to come to Paterson and she is now completely involved in the community."

"She brings women together and makes sure they are heard. I've seen how strong women are; I have seven sisters."

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