Diversity Activist and Philanthropist
Nation’s Top 87 Women
Mentoring Leaders

First Lady Michelle Obama, Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor
Congresswoman Carolyn Maloney, Bonnie McElveen-Hunter
Judith McHale, Lulu Flores, Kathy Calvin, Betty Hudson
Dr. Paula Whetsel-Ribeau, Rosa Whitaker, Dawn Sweeney
Ambassador Julia Chang Bloch, Joie Godwin

First Lady Michelle Obama on the Importance of Mentoring
and Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor’s Journey to Living the American Dream

And more in this special issue…
Pilar Mendiola Fernandez
The Washington Center
Senior Vice President

Pilar Mendiola Fernandez is a leading expert in the fields of experiential education and the development of advanced leadership training. Pilar serves as senior vice president of advanced leadership programs at The Washington Center (TWC). Pilar created a new division within TWC to bring young international leaders from around the world to Washington, D.C. for training that combines theoretical and experiential components with integrating leadership and public management practices in an internship experience. Pilar leads TWC’s groundbreaking international programs, and today The Washington Center has worked with more than 35 countries from around the world to bring international students and high-profile public servants, such as secretaries of state and governors, to TWC for advanced leadership seminars and professional training programs. The international division of The Washington Center works with Mexico, Canada, South Korea, China, Brazil, Russia, Singapore, Vietnam, India, Taiwan, Albania, South Africa, and Japan, among others. Pilar is also a writer; her Spanish language short stories of her personal experiences are meant to empower women. She practices Bikram Yoga and is also a personal stylist. Pilar was born in Veracruz, Mexico, and resides in Washington, D.C.

My life has been blessed with people who believed, guided, and pushed me to achieve my potential for causes higher than myself. These people shared stories that helped me overcome my fears and limitations. This could be in such simple ways as sharing a book, a speech, or even a seemingly innocuous conversation at a train station. It has been said that it takes a village to raise a child. I believe that it takes a village to raise a good leader.

I was seven with two long, dirty-blonde braids and passionate about the universe. I loved learning, writing and, most importantly, sharing what I’d learned or written. My favorite performance of all was “playing teacher” with my little sister and her group of friends whom I would recruit for a mock classroom in our pain. I had a blackboard, chalk, stickers, notebooks, and most important, eager students. My five-year-old students seemed interested while I knowingly explained what they needed to learn. My favorite performance of all was “playing teacher” with my little sister and her group of friends whom I would recruit for a mock classroom in our pain. I had a blackboard, chalk, stickers, notebooks, and most important, eager students. My five-year-old students seemed interested while I knowingly explained what they needed to learn.

My passion met my destiny for learning and sharing knowledge in November 1996 when I was hired as a program advisor for The Washington Center. Years later, my experiences are still framed by the memories I have from working with my first boss and mentor, William M. Burke, founder of TWC. Bill would converse with me for endless hours, guiding, counseling and of course correcting me if I was wrong or disoriented about anything, be it life, work, personnel, etc. He reinforced the values of giving back, intellectual curiosity, believing in the power of ideas, and the wonderful footprint of mistakes and how to learn from them. He taught me about acknowledging mistakes and the need for immediate apology, about moving on, about trusting people and, most importantly, about creating as many opportunities as possible for people and the real meaning of access: how opening a door for someone can empower them for the rest of their lives. For them (or at least funny) since I had my class regularly I have my mother to thank for taking me to the papelerias (paper stores) to acquire my teaching materials. She saw my potential and wanted to empower me to follow my dreams.

My most important memories are from the mentoring experience, either as a mentor or as a mentee. Even so it is imperative to recognize that everyone has the opportunity in life to be a mentor to another if we share our experiences, challenges or accomplishments and how we got there. Sharing a single experience with someone can help transform his or her life or inspire someone to take action. Give them a little bit of yourself; it may change their perception of the world or of themselves.

Learn by heart that a partnership is a wonderful and efficient approach to life that can achieve breathtaking results for the individual and a community. It is our responsibility to teach what we were fortunate enough to learn. Show someone how to open doors so that they may open doors for many others. Knowing that you can give the confidence of knowing that someone is there for them. Together, you can conquer the world one door at a time.

Professional mentoring at its best

The Washington Center is located in Washington, D.C. and is an independent, nonprofit organization serving hundreds of colleges and universities in the United States and other countries by providing students with challenging opportunities to work and learn in Washington, D.C. for academic credit. The experience helps students transform theory into practice, ambition into purpose, and potential into achievement. We have more than 40,000 alumni, many of whom are in leadership positions in the public, private and nonprofit sectors in the United States and around the world, making it the largest program of its kind.

TWC’s unique quality is its vast network of mentors and advisors, an outstanding group of seasoned professionals from different fields – media, environment, law, international affairs, congressional affairs, business, and management – and all are dedicated to mentoring, counseling, guiding, providing feedback and evaluating the progress of students throughout their intensive academic and professional experiences.

Under TWC’s format, each student also has a “workplace advisor” in addition to their personal advisor. Both advisors, together with the student, work on a professional plan for achieving great results. In addition, we have adjunct faculty members, all with advanced degrees, who teach more than forty classes every semester. They also teach students for the entire fifteen weeks of the program. Each program has a variety of speakers who enthusiastically share their experiences in the field with the students.

Our professional mentoring approach allows students to immerse themselves in an intensive academic and professional experience, with the certainty that they will be guided and challenged by their advisors. Our advisors and mentors will not only share their knowledge, experience and network of contacts, but will provide guidance under three key components: leadership, social responsibility, and professional achievement.

We strive to provide high-potential students committed to learning with the opportunity to test-drive their passion. They get to reflect on every activity they get involved with, but with the added benefit of a team of counselors and support staff. The Washington Center is an experience that transforms, and without a doubt it transformed me and gave me the opportunity to give back and live my passion while playing an active role in bringing students from around the world to experience our program. I could not ask for more.

I am a firm believer in the power of mentoring. I am committed to it in my personal and professional life. I have been honored to personally mentor committed and unique individuals. It is a responsibility and a commitment for both the mentor and the mentee to continue to acquire skills and learn life lessons while sharing experiences with each other. In my case, the values that I want to foster in my mentees are integrity, excellence, evolution, kindness, loyalty and the importance of giving back to the community.
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I consider myself lucky that I have realized that mentoring is about acknowledging mistakes and how to learn from them. He taught me about acknowledging mistakes and the need for immediate apology, about moving on, about trusting people and, most importantly, about creating as many opportunities as possible for people and the real meaning of access: how opening a door for someone can empower them for the rest of their lives.

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