

ROLE MODEL

TV's Maria inspires new generations of leaders

Sonia Manzano jokes about the ease of breaking into show business. After all, she walked directly from acting classes at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, onto the set of one of TV's most innovative and longest-running productions. In the role of Maria, Manzano helped establish Sesame Street as a prominent voice in the education of young children worldwide, but she also quickly became a pioneering leader in the celebration of Latin American heritage.

After addressing delegates at the 2008 Kiwanis International Convention in Orlando, Florida, Manzano sat down for a conversation on leadership and change with Kiwanis International CEO Rob Parker.

Rob Parker: When did you realize you were a leader?

Sonia Manzano: I realized I had the potential to be a leader when we were shooting the first *Sesame Street* movie. The situation required someone to step up and provide some leadership. (Someone had to decide whether or not Muppets could be called people!) I stepped up to the plate with some answers. Up to that point, I don't think it really had occurred to me. Some of us don't recognize we're leading until we look around and see that people are listening to our words and following us. This is certainly true of Martin Luther King Jr. Although he was initially reluctant to lead, people kept looking to him for answers and eventually he knew he must answer the call. These kinds of defining moments are

important for us to recognize and respond to.

RP: How have you dealt with issues involving change?

SM: In order for us—either *Sesame Street* or Kiwanis—to be viable, we have to change. When we first started *Sesame Street*, I didn't think any other Muppet would surpass Big Bird in popularity, but now Elmo has done that. *Sesame Street* always tried to help move people forward, even if it was just a little bit. As Kiwanis works to remain relevant in a world that is so different than what it was when you first started, you have to be willing to give up some of your old sensibilities and embrace some new ones.

RP: Are you personally involved in community service?

SM: I volunteer with a group called the Bronx River Alliance, devoted to cleaning up a river that runs through the South Bronx (New York City) neighborhood I grew up in. The river connects one of the poorest neighborhoods in America with one of the richest. So when we have these meetings, a diverse group shows up. What ties us together is that we all want to make the river accessible to all. It's beautiful to watch these very different people come together to work toward a common goal. It's the essence of service.

RP: For years, Kiwanis clubs have been investing in children early in their lives, often before the age of 5. Do you see value in this approach?

SM: It's obvious to me that if you take care of children early you can prevent many of the problems that are much more expensive to fix later on. It's much harder to impact a young person who's already in trouble than to make sure they're successful from the beginning. On *Sesame Street* we work to make children feel like they're an important part of society and have something to offer. When children understand they're part of something bigger than themselves, they're on a path toward success.

RP: At Kiwanis we've been focusing on people's strengths rather than their weaknesses and putting them in positions where they can maximize their personal gifts. Would you agree with that philosophy?

SM: Absolutely! We had a *Sesame Street* producer who had the ability to put teams together that could solve whatever problem we had. She had a won-



derful talent of recognizing who had the potential to be a great writer, a great performer or a great musician. She was more successful than others because she was able to get people in the right position and doing things they loved to do. When you're working in your area of strength, it really stops feeling like work. Everything is easier. I'm sure this is true for your volunteers.

RP: What would you tell Kiwanis leaders who want to make their clubs more attractive to people of Latin descent?

SM: You have to understand that there

are many different types of Latin people. Although we share a common language, we're not all the same. Once you understand that we're all individual people, it will be easier to invite the people who are right for Kiwanis. The major error is in thinking that we're all the same. Ultimately, you need to reach out and invite people to get involved who are different from the typical Kiwanis club member, both in cultural and socioeconomic terms. It won't be easy—but the results will be beautiful.

RP: What are you most proud of in your career?

SM: I'm very proud to have provided some inspiration for Latin girls and women. A young newscaster once came up to me and said that if she hadn't seen me on the screen, it never would have occurred to her to seek a career in television. This was meaningful to me because I remember watching television as a child and wondering how I'd be able to contribute to a society that didn't seem to see me, or even know I existed. And they didn't see me because people like me weren't reflected on TV. I feel very privileged to play a small role in allowing Latin men and women to be seen and appreciated.