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A force of nature in
Madison's Latino community

By Kathryn Kingsbury

The first time I met community social worker Fabiola Hamdan, the phrase that kept ringing through my mind was “force of nature.”

It was 2004 and I was researching an article about Hispanic immigrants adjusting to life in Madison. “You must talk to Fabiola Hamdan,” was the refrain echoed by almost everyone I interviewed.

Hamdan’s list of professional and personal accomplishments is dizzying, to put it mildly. For eight years, she has served a largely Spanish-speaking clientele in east Madison’s Darbo-Worthington neighborhood as a social worker for the Dane County Department of Human Services.

She has founded or co-founded at least a half dozen community and social service organizations, including the Madison Latino Social Workers Organization; the Latino Children and Families Council, which holds a Spanish-language children’s festival every spring in Madison; LASUP (Latino Support Group), a network of social service providers and others working within Latino communities; Tiawanacu, a Bolivian dance group; the Housing Caseworkers Group; and Voces Latinas, which aims to improve services to Hispanic victims of domestic abuse.

The Business Forum, a professional women’s organization, awarded Hamdan the 2007 Dane County ATHENA Award, which recognizes individuals who are dedicated to improving others’ quality of life and helping women reach their full leadership potential; in 2003, she received the Social Work Award for Distinguished Service from the National Association of Social Workers. A Spanish-language radio drama she helped develop to increase awareness of postpartum depression is receiving national attention, and *Selecciones*, the Spanish edition of *Reader’s Digest*, is scheduled to run a piece on her this spring.

During that first meeting with Hamdan in 2004, she passionately discussed the challenges that her clients face — like the man who was an attorney in Venezuela but now cleans offices because his law license is not valid in the United States. She was a fountain of knowledge about goings-on in Madison and seemed to have an endless network of contacts in the social services community and beyond. Her energy was contagious; when I left her office at the end of the interview, I was almost giddy from it.

In a recent interview, Hamdan said in characteristic understatement, “I think I chose the right profession. I am proud of what I do in my job. It’s what keeps me going.”

The rough road to Madison

But when Hamdan was a teenager in La Paz, Bolivia, she never would have guessed that life would lead her to a profession in social work — much less in the midwestern United States.

“I moved to Madison with no intention to stay,” says Hamdan of that fateful trip 22 years ago. The oldest of three children, Hamdan came to Madison with her family so that her mother could receive treatment for a brain tumor. Although her mother eventually recovered, the treatment stretched out from a few months to a few years. Hamdan had just

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completed high school before leaving La Paz and was terribly homesick, but her first priority was to stay with her family.

Hamdan’s younger brother and sister, both students at Memorial High School, were learning English quickly, but Hamdan herself was so uncomfortable with the language that she was afraid to answer the phone. When she realized her family would be in Madison for the long haul, she set about learning the language — a step that turned out to be the first on her path to becoming a social worker.

To encourage her bilingualism, Hamdan’s mother “would always volunteer me to help the other Latinos in the neighborhood” with tasks such as finding doctors, making appointments and visiting their children’s schools.

Hamdan even began to drop in at Memo-

rial to check on her siblings’ academic progress, and when she found out they were taking lots of hands-on electives instead of the academically rigorous courses that would prepare them for college, she made sure they changed their schedules. “I was not very popular with both of them,” she says. But her parents had always pressed upon their children the motto “Your job is to get an education,” and she was going to help make sure that they did just that.

Encouraging education

It’s an ethos she tries to share with the girls she informally mentors and her younger clients, many of whom do not get the same message at home. It’s not that the families she works with are different about their children’s success, but many of the parents come from places where secondary schooling either did not exist or was priced out of their range. Kids might think, “Dad didn’t go to school, and he still has a job,” without realizing that their opportunities will be much greater if they complete their educations.

During my recent visit with Hamdan in her office, she showed me a framed copy of the certificate she received in 1994 upon making the dean’s list as an undergraduate at UW-Madison. That was just one semester after she was put on academic probation for failing one course and earning Ds in three others. She keeps it on the windowsill just behind her desk as a reminder that no one is doomed to failure — academically or otherwise — no matter how hopeless the situation may seem right now.

And Hamdan admits that sometimes things do seem pretty bad. “On a day-to-day basis, you have to deal with some sort of crisis,” she says. There is the woman who was recovering from open-heart surgery and had no place to stay when she was released from the hospital, the families suffering through cycles of job lay-offs and apartment evictions, the women who are left with little or no income when their husbands are incarcerated. How does Hamdan get the strength to stay hopeful and keep helping people in the face of such problems?

“Every day when I go home, I find one good deed that I’ve done, and that always keeps me going. I am really happy when we find a resource for a person. And we’re lucky that people open up to us about so many intimate things. I feel very special to be that person.”

Kathryn Kingsbury is a Madison-based freelance writer.