

TEXAS MONTHLY

A Seat at the Table

Why do the state's biggest nonprofits struggle when it comes to Hispanic representation?

BY MIMI SWARTZ MAY 2015

Juliet Stipeche doesn't look like a troublemaker. She has a broad smile, a contagious laugh, and a barely tamed mane of black curls. Her disarming, effervescent manner is reminiscent of the most popular girl in your high school, the one everyone really did like. But behind that charming exterior lurks a relentlessness that would shame a Jack Russell terrier. This is particularly true when it comes to the Hispanic community that the forty-year-old strives to represent. A medical malpractice defense attorney, she has in recent years spent much of her time as a board member on the Houston Independent School District (she was president last year) and the associate director of the Richard Tapia Center for Excellence and Equity, an organization at Rice University that helps minorities and women succeed in school and business. Stipeche credits her immigrant parents—her father is from Argentina, and her mother is from Mexico—with her polite but insistent form of activism. Argentines, she said, could be aggressive. “What is the ego? It's the little bit of Argentine in all of us,” she told me, quoting a maxim she learned growing up. “My mom is generous and loves everybody. I had an interesting contrast growing up in the two worlds.”

Stipeche started her latest advocacy project, last January, by accident. A friend was waiting for his child to be admitted for surgery at a large nonprofit Texas hospital—Stipeche, citing his privacy, declines to say which. With time to kill, he started checking out those formal portraits of board members that so often adorn the walls of hospital lobbies. Something struck him right away. There were framed photos of prosperous-looking white men. And photos of prosperous-looking white women. And photos of prosperous-looking African Americans too. But there were no framed photos of Hispanics.

Why was that, he wondered? Were there really no Hispanic members on that particular hospital board? In the year 2015? When he told Stipeche about his discovery, she couldn't let it go, so she decided to do some research. Just how many important Texas nonprofits did in fact have Hispanic members on their boards?

She assumed that finding the answers would be fairly simple, so she started with a major hospital chain in Houston, Memorial Hermann, because it was large and well-known. She went on the website, expecting to find a list of board members within minutes. But after a lot of clicking and searching, she had nothing. So she got on the phone. “I'd like to know more about your board,” she said, and promptly found herself on hold indefinitely. She called back and was promised that someone would get in touch with her, but no one ever did. “It was like they didn't want to give me an answer,” she said.

This was curious to Stipeche, because according to the guidelines of the Internal Revenue Service, all tax-exempt organizations—that is, nonprofits—are required to share the membership of their boards and make the information easily available to the public. More investigations of more Texas nonprofits followed. However, each search left Stipeche even more frustrated. “I thought, this is going to take forever,” she told me. “I'm a lawyer, I've done research, and I couldn't figure it out.”

After about two weeks of poking around, Stipeche mentioned her difficulties to a friend, who offered to connect her with Cynthia Thomas, whom he compared to Lisbeth Salander, the fictional hacker best known as

the “girl with the dragon tattoo.” Thomas, who was once a policy analyst and research director in the Minnesota Senate Republican Caucus, is the president of TriDimension Strategies, a government-relations firm based in Dallas. In other words, she knows her way around data and did not think Stipeche’s project would take up much time.

Thomas visited the Texas Non Profits website (txnp.org) and learned that there were nearly three thousand nonprofits in the state, a daunting number. She and Stipeche decided to narrow the search to the one hundred or so largest boards according to asset size, which ranged from around \$350 million to almost \$7 billion. (Stipeche uses the word “Hispanic” instead of “Latino” because, as she sees it, most of the immigrants in Texas are from Mexico, and their preferred term is “Hispanic.”) About three quarters had a website and from there, she found board lists for 43 of the companies. But, aside from 1 or 2, the lists contained nothing but the names of the members—no biographical information was included. For the remaining 57, Thomas had to investigate further.

It wasn’t easy. She went back to Memorial Hermann, with \$4.5 billion in assets, and started looking in all the logical places, clicking on tabs titled “About Us” and “Corporate Compliance.” No luck. Then Thomas placed a call to the main number. She was pinballed around various administrative offices for about twenty minutes, until finally someone transferred her to someone who said she was the secretary of the board of directors. When asked to provide a board list, that person said she would not share the information because all board members were volunteers; beyond that, she would not tell Thomas where a list could be found.

Thomas didn’t do much better after a Google search: she again ended up at the Memorial Hermann site, on a tab called “Patients & Caregivers.” Scrolling past twenty items, below “PayMyBill” and “Nursery Photos,” she found a list of the board of directors, but it was for another division of the mammoth hospital chain. Eventually she found the correct list when she uncovered Memorial Hermann’s tax returns on another nonprofit site. (I requested a list of board members too but never received one.)

Memorial Hermann was not unique. Organizations seemed to be purposely burying the information. Sometimes Thomas obtained actual tax filings, which are public, only to find outdated board lists. In fact, the more she researched, the more resistance she found. “I was shocked by how people were hiding things. What really took me by surprise was that they would say, ‘No, I’m not going to give you that information’—because that’s actually illegal.”

In another case, Thomas tried to find a board member list for the Brazos Higher Education Authority, a nonprofit with \$6.75 billion in assets, and was similarly rebuffed. Thomas wrote the contact person specified on the website and asked for a list. He wrote back wanting to know why and then sent the list only after Thomas offered an explanation.

Texas Health Resources, with \$3 billion in assets, was even worse. Thomas called the main number and was routed to human resources only to be transferred several times, then told the list was posted on an internal company website. Thomas asked that the list be faxed to her. She is still waiting to receive it.

All told, it took about two weeks to assemble the board lists of slightly more than a hundred of Texas’s largest nonprofits, and in doing so, Thomas discovered perhaps one reason why this information isn’t exactly shouted from the heavens: 47 of the organizations had no Hispanic board members, at least that Thomas could identify easily. (She also researched non-Hispanic board names—to see whether a member might have had a Hispanic surname before marriage—and checked for information that would suggest a Hispanic background.) Another 34 boards had Hispanic representation of 10 percent or less.

Among those with no discernable Hispanics on their boards were Texas Children's Hospital, Texas Health Resources, Baylor University, Children's Medical Center of Dallas, Baylor University Medical Center, Texans Credit Union, the North Texas Higher Education Authority, the American Heart Association, the Texas Tech Foundation, and the George W. Bush Foundation. The Irving-based Boy Scouts of America, by contrast, looked positively egalitarian, with a Hispanic board membership of about 6 percent, as did Rice University and Trinity University, with close to 4 percent for each board. "I expected the results to be bad but not this bad," Stipeche told me.

My guess is that no one would have. After all, this is the twenty-first century, where diversity is at least given plenty of lip service. More important, Hispanics are the fastest-growing ethnic group in Texas. In 2012 nearly 40 percent of the state's population was Hispanic. In 25 years, that group is projected by demographers to reach nearly 50 percent. And yet the power of Hispanics has long lagged behind that of other minorities; an explosive growth rate has brought continued poverty and an alarming high school drop-out rate.

Part of the problem, Stipeche believes, is that not enough Hispanics have reached positions of power and so cannot serve as role models for others in their communities. Of course, there are high-profile Hispanic politicians—the Castro brothers, George P. Bush—but the number doesn't represent the population figures. The numbers of Hispanic teachers, doctors, lawyers, nurses, and, yes, nonprofit board members are also not reflective of the community as a whole.

It has been noted that Hispanics are less well organized as a voter base and can sometimes be too wedded to their country of origin; they are not participants in the political process in the way African Americans are, a point Stipeche concedes. But without strong advocates, along with fewer social barriers, change will never occur. Many institutions are still learning: Rice mathematics professor Richard Tapia, for whom the Center for Excellence and Equity is named, told me that when he complained about a lack of Hispanics on one national nonprofit board, an African American board member responded that he took care of all minority issues. Imagine a white man saying the same thing about women's health issues, or, for that matter, a Hispanic saying the same thing about African Americans. And a few Hispanics I spoke with who do serve on boards told me they were exhausted from having to serve on so many; once they have "proved" themselves, they get asked to serve over and over.

Why are nonprofit boards such a sticking point with Stipeche and other members of the Hispanic community? Because boards control powerful institutions and shape their culture and their commitment. A board that does not look like its community is not likely to understand that community's needs; certain groups will be overlooked, as will their attendant problems.

There might be hospitals where Spanish-speaking mothers cannot receive proper instruction in child care, so a baby ends up in the emergency room. Or parents who are hesitant to come to school events because they cannot speak English. Or kids who think they can't do well in math or science because they never see a Hispanic teacher in those fields. Volunteer opportunities that could lead a child out of poverty and into new worlds go unnoticed because an organization doesn't know how to reach out.

After the results of her survey came in, Stipeche sent letters to each of the nonprofits, asking to meet with their boards to discuss the benefits of increased Hispanic representation. So far, she has heard back from only three. "Some people say it's ignorance, I say it's *ignore*-ance," Stipeche told me about the lack of diversity. "Is the purpose of a nonprofit to help the community or to avoid paying taxes?"

"What kind of Texas are we building?"