

# PRESS RELEASE

October 5, 2017

## ESSEX COUNTY FREEHOLDERS CELEBRATE HISPANIC HERITAGE MONTH



Pictured are (from left to right, second row), Freeholder Wayne L. Richardson, Jesus Casiano, Jr., Freeholder Rolando Bobadilla, Marcos N. Sanchez, Jose Rafael Santiago, Carlos Lejniaks, (from left to right, first row), Jessenia Zavala, Katilia Vélez, Inés Mercedes Davis-Parks, Lourdes Cortez, Katilia Vélez, and Freeholder Cynthia D. Toro. PHOTO BY GLEN FRIESON

(Newark, NJ) – The Essex County Board of Chosen Freeholders held its 2017 Hispanic Heritage Month Celebration on Wednesday, September 27, 2017, at the Hall of Records. The ceremony commemorated the heritage, culture, resilience, and spirit of the Hispanic community and was followed by a catered reception.

Freeholder President Britnee N. Timberlake began the program with welcoming remarks, celebrating Essex County’s radiation of paying homage to the many diverse cultures and ethnicities that make up the County. Freeholder Cynthia D. Toro of District 5 and Freeholder Rolando Bobadilla of District 1 also led the program, citing the successes of the Board’s honorees and Hispanic Americans throughout the country.

This year’s honorees included: **Samuel Gonzalez** of Newark; **Yesenia Lopez** of East Orange; **Carlos Lejniaks** of Hoboken; **Katilia Vélez** of Newark; **Lourdes Cortez** of Elmwood Park; **Jesus Casiano, Jr.**, of Newark; **Inés Mercedes Davis-Parks** of Newark; **Jessenia Zavala** of Belleville; **Jose Rafael Santiago** of Newark; **Marcos N. Sanchez** of Newark; **Ivette A. Toledo-Navarro** of Newark; and **Analilia Mejia** of Glen Ridge.

**Samuel Gonzalez** is Chief of Staff to Newark's North Ward Councilman, Anibal Ramos, Jr., and previously served as an Essex County Freeholder. Since 2016, he has also served as Chairman of the North Ward Democratic Committee, and he previously served as its Vice Chair. He has a long history of public service with organizations such as the Boys and Girls Club of Newark, the North Ward Center, Project Pride, and the Roberto Clemente and Rick Cerone Little Leagues. He is married to New Jersey Senator M. Teresa Ruiz, and they are the proud parents of Silver Inaru Ruiz Gonzalez.

In 2002, **Yesenia Lopez** graduated from Rutgers University Newark where she obtained a Bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice. In May 2007, she went on to become the first Latina archivist in the State of New Jersey when she received a Master's degree in Library and Information Science with a Certificate in Advanced Studies in Archives and Records Management from Long Island University. She has remained committed to serving her community as a volunteer for Big Brothers, Big Sisters of Morris, Bergen, and Passaic Counties and the "To Save Latin America, Reaching Our Dream" Program. She also serves on the Board of Directors of the Boys to Leaders Foundation. Yesenia is engaged and a new homeowner. She is also the proud mother of 5-year-old son Denzel.

**Carlos Lejniaks** is the Chief Executive Officer of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Essex, Hudson, and Union Counties and is the immediate-past Chairman of Big Brothers Big Sisters of New Jersey. Under his leadership, the organization went from serving approximately 100 youth to well over 1,100 youth. He graduated from Brown University with a Bachelor of Arts degree in International Relations and Commerce and was an Aspen Fellow. He also holds a Master of Science degree from the London School of Economics and an Honorary Doctorate degree from Saint Peter's University. Carlos served on President Barack Obama's Regional Finance Committee, Governor Chris Christie's Education Transition Team, and Newark Mayor Cory Booker's Transition Team.

**Katilia Vélez** graduated Magna Cum Laude from American University with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology and is an administrative, non-profit professional with a background in development, advocacy, and activism. She currently serves as the Development Director for Ironbound Community Corporation in Newark, a development and planning organization providing comprehensive programming for the community. She is a trustee for various local and state-wide agencies, including the Friends of the Hispanic Research and Information Center (FoHRIC) and Latinas United for Political Empowerment-Political Action Committee (LUPE-PAC), to name a few. She is married Juan Pablo Cardona, a high school Social Studies teacher and United States Veteran of the Coast Guard, and together they reside in Newark.

Since 2005, **Lourdes Cortez** has served as the President and Chief Executive Officer of North Jersey Federal Credit Union (North Jersey Federal), the 9th largest credit union in the State of New Jersey. She has spearheaded growth from \$168 million to \$233 million in assets. Under her leadership, North Jersey Federal is on track to open more small business accounts than in any other year since the institution opened in 1936. As the first Latina C.E.O. of a credit union in New Jersey, she embraces diversity. She is an active member of the Commerce and Industry Association of New Jersey, the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, and Education Credit Union Council, to name a few. She has volunteered for La Casa De Don Pedro, the March of Dimes, Eva's Village in Paterson, and more.

From 1984 to 1989, **Jesus Casiano, Jr.**, studied Political Science and Public Administration at the Inter-American University of San German in Puerto Rico, and since 2011, he has served as a Legislative Aide for North Ward Councilmember Anibal Ramos, Jr., of Newark and Senate Aide for Senator M. Teresa Ruiz. He previously worked for the Governor of Puerto Rico and State Senate as a Legislative Lobbyist, Inter-Governmental Coordinator, and Public Policy Advisor. In 2007, he joined the Northward Center where he served as Project Director for the Hispanic Outreach and Advocacy Initiative Program and the Latino Institute. Additionally, he conducted

fieldwork, promoting Program Recruiting and Marketing for Casa Israel. He is a strong advocate for the community, serving on the North Ward Democratic Committee for two terms and as an Essex County Committee Member and Executive Director of the Central Ward Democratic Committee.

**Inés Mercedes Davis-Parks** graduated Cum Laude from Kean University with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Spanish and was a Project RITE Scholar. She holds a Master's degree in Spanish Language and Culture from La Universidad de Salamanca in Spain and a Master's degree in Education Administration from Grand Canyon University in Phoenix, Arizona. She also graduated from the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City and the Paris Fashion Institute in France. In 2001, she began her career in education as a Substitute-Spanish Teacher at the former Morton Street Middle School under the tutelage of the late Carl Gregory. She currently teaches at Science Park High School and has taught Spanish at West Side High School and American History High School. She also served as an Adjunct Professor at Essex County College's Wise Women Center, teaching communication skills to non-native English speakers.

**Jessenia Zavala** is a renowned Ecuadorian artist who has excelled in the areas of music and media in Ecuador and the United States. With a career that spans over 20 years, she has 7 CD productions and 2 videos featuring Cumbia and Ecuadorian music to her credit. She recorded her first album at the age of 13 and was invited to be part of La Farandula music group. At the age of 16, she had her first radio program called "Super K" and a television program titled *Siempre lo Nuestro*. She was also a part of the television program titled *A si es Ecuador* distributed by Azteca America.

**Jose Rafael Santiago** is a community leader from Newark. In 1994, he co-founded the Roberto Clemente League Newark where he has served in various positions including: Coach, Manager, Coordinator, and Vice President until 2003. He founded the Latin Fever Team and the Latin Fever, Jrs., and served as a sponsor for several years. In 2016, he created his own non-profit organization, La Voz Community Engagement, to help improve the quality of life of others. As the President of La Voz Community Engagement, he engages the community and breathes life, love, hope, opportunity, and joy back into the world through social events, scholarships, career training, health and wellness for all ages, and more.

**Marcos N. Sanchez** is Vice President of La Voz Community Engagement. Previously, he played professional basketball in Ecuador and was a member of the national basketball team, representing Ecuador in many international tournaments. He has worked in Newark as a volunteer community activist, teaching basketball, soccer, Zumba, and volleyball to hundreds of youth and adults throughout the city. In addition to organizing volleyball tournaments, he has worked with the Roberto Clemente Little League, the Juana Diaz Softball Team, and the Newark Spres Basketball Team. He is an outstanding role model, athlete, coach, activist, and mentor.

**Ivette A. Toledo-Navarro** went to college in the Dominican Republic and returned to the United States to continue her studies, settling in Newark. She worked for major corporations, including Prudential Insurance Company and Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Jersey and is currently a Business Consultant specializing in small business compliance and audit services. She created a sports program at Branch Brook Elementary School to provide children with a safe place to go after school and on the weekends. She is a persistent advocate of children and youth in Newark. She has helped families receive holiday meals and gifts and share in the joy of a \$150,000.00 new soccer field. She also volunteered for several weeks to ensure thousands of children that were displaced by Newark Public School's new model were enrolled in September 2014. She lives in Newark with her husband Roberto Navarro, and together they are the proud parents of Alejandro (16), Mia (14), Gabriel (13), and Daniel (11).

**Analilia Mejia** served as the political director for SEIU 32BJ New Jersey, and currently serves as the Executive Director of the New Jersey Working Families Alliance (NJWFA), a statewide

nonpartisan organization that seeks to promote and defend the interest of New Jersey's working families. She has addressed issues such as Earned Sick Days for all workers, Environmental Justice, Expanding Voting Rights, and promoting a more Participatory Democracy. Under her leadership, the organization spearheaded an unprecedented effort that has resulted in earned sick time laws in thirteen New Jersey municipalities. In April 2015, Analilia was honored by President Obama as a "White House Champion of Change" for her advocacy on behalf of workers. Her leadership led to the creation of the most comprehensive Voting Rights Reform bills passed in New Jersey.

During the event, Heislie Gamarra, Piero Vergara, Valeska Vergara, and Naldo Espinoza from the Arte & Folklore School of Dance in Union City, New Jersey, graced the audience with two special performances that exemplified the beauty of Hispanic Culture.

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