

SPARTA LIVING

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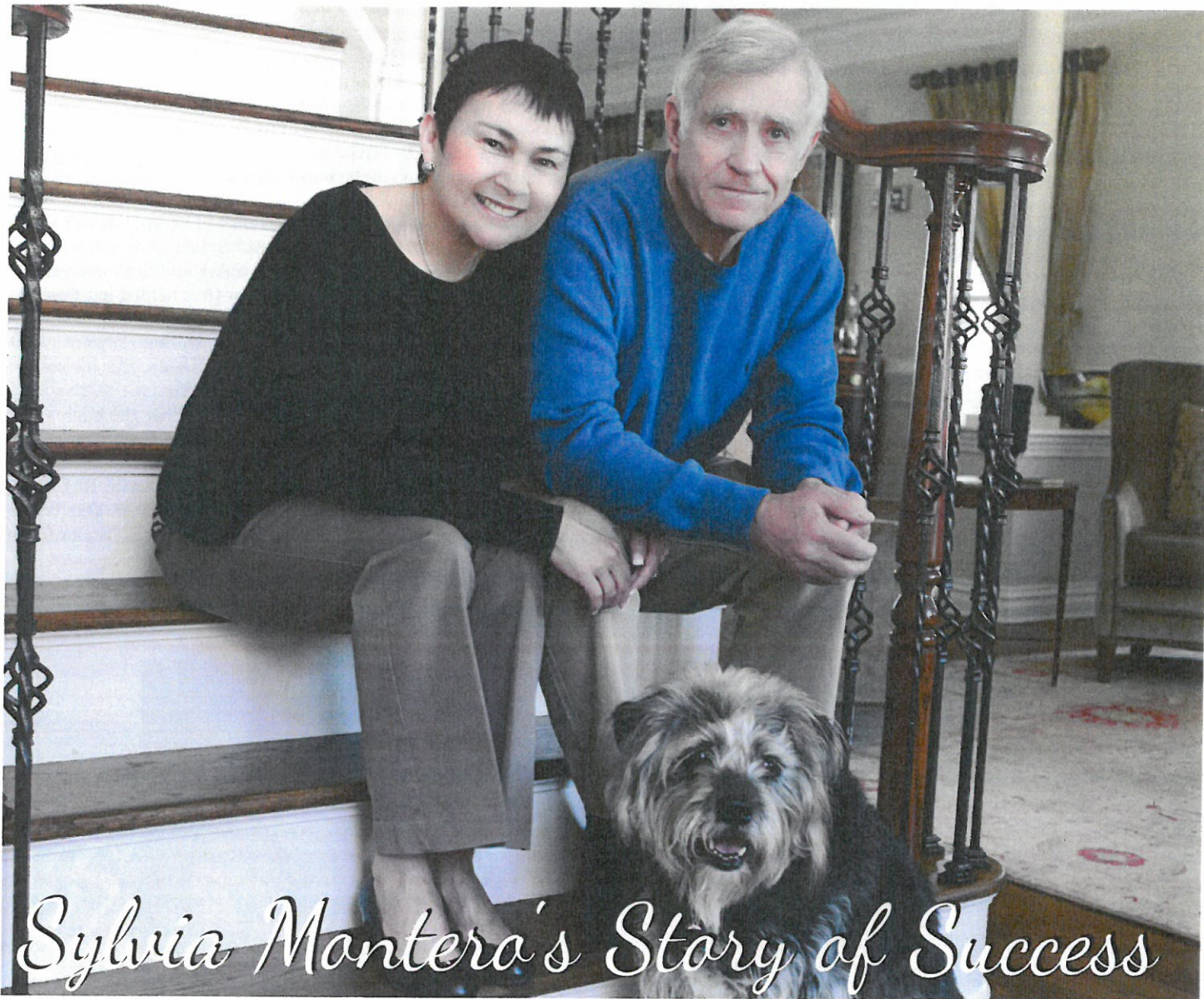
An exclusive magazine serving the neighborhoods of Sparta and Lake Mohawk

Sylvia Montero's Story of Success

Cover photo by
Megan O'Keeffe
Photography



Best Version Media



Sylvia Montero's Story of Success

By Edan Stanley

Photos by Megan O'Keeffe Photography

Hailing from a house on stilts in Puerto Rico to a custom-designed, retirement getaway in Sparta, Sylvia Montero basks in her success by helping others find theirs.

Recalling the days when she would play with her four siblings beneath the sugar plantation home, Sylvia remembers the family decision to move to "Nueva York" to find more opportunity. Her father worked on the plantation and her mother stayed home to raise the five children.

"We were living on pennies a day so we decided to migrate. We came in 1957 and if you look at migration for Puerto Ricans to the mainland, 1957 is the peak year." The Montero

family packed up their lives and ventured to New York where they were put on welfare and housed on the lower east side of New York City through the Grand Street Settlement, a social service institution founded in 1916 to help the massive wave of immigrants settle in the United States.

Sylvia's parents always stressed the importance of education to her and her siblings. While a lot of children might shy away from working hard in school, Sylvia was the exact opposite. Growing up, she was jumping at every opportunity and taking advantage of ways to learn more. Success was always a goal, not an option.

"In order for you to have choices, in order for you to be better, you have to have an education. So I went to school to get As. There was no money for college and the only way to get money



for college was through a scholarship," says Sylvia.

With the encouragement of her teachers, Sylvia applied to Barnard College, received a full scholarship and majored in Spanish. This allowed her to receive a top-notch education. During her freshman year, Sylvia married; during her sophomore year, she had her son, Kenneth.

Sylvia graduated Barnard, only taking a single semester off to raise her baby because her parents' endless support inspired her to finish.

She beat stereotypes and common beliefs that having a child would hold her back from achieving her goals, but Sylvia never paid any attention to these ideas. With constant diligence and help from her family and friends she had made, she earned her masters from Queens College and began teaching.

Life was going to change again. New York was going through a financial crisis, money was tight and layoffs were happening everywhere.

"The year 1976 was an incredible year for me because I finished my masters, but I lost my job, got divorced and I was raising a six-year-old. My parents had always aspired to move back to Puerto Rico and they did." Sylvia soon followed, where she took a job at a local university.

After six months at the university, Sylvia was offered a position as a translator at a nearby pharmaceutical company. They needed to translate their operating procedures from English to Spanish. "I bought myself a couple of dictionaries and would speak to supervisors to understand the information a bit more." Their human resources (HR) position was open and Sylvia was asked if she was interested in working in the personnel department. This is where her journey into HR began.

"The boss interviewed me and he told me later after I'd been working for a while that I knew nothing at the time of my interview but they liked me so much and wanted to work with me and help me learn."

She joined the HR association in Puerto Rico where one of the world's largest pharmaceutical companies, Pfizer, eventually recruited her to work for them. Sylvia moved back to New York with her family, bought a house and began a new life and traveling a lot for work. Fortunately, her parents followed her back to the states and helped her raise her son.

"I focused on climbing that corporate ladder. To me it was all about being successful and having the flexibility so that my son would have more comfort than I did."

Sylvia worked over 30 years in human resources, became the highest ranking Latina at a pharmaceutical giant as the senior vice president of HR at Pfizer, Inc., received numerous awards and retired at age 58.

Sylvia now lives in Sparta with her husband and mother,

living every moment of her retirement to the fullest.

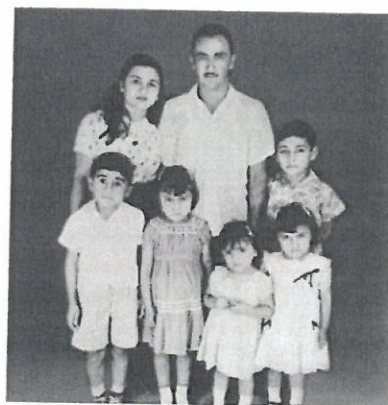
"My retirement is all about giving back," says Sylvia. She works hard, even in retirement with different organizations and people, to ensure that others find the same chances for growth that she was offered growing up.

Sylvia created a scholarship for women at Barnard under her parents' names. The Eligia and Cruz Montero Scholarship is a dedication to her parents' everlasting support and inspiration to become successful. "What I said to Barnard was I would like them to find another 'Sylvia' and help her the way I was helped. I get letters from the scholarship recipient every year," says Sylvia.

"I give back to the community where I grew up, where I went to school, the Grand Street Settlement." Sylvia is actually on the Board of the Grand Street Settlement today and does everything she can to contribute to the organization that helped her family so much.

In 2011, Sylvia published a book called *Make it Your Business: Dare to Climb the Ladder of Leadership*. Her life story became a "memoir of possibilities" that will continue to give wisdom and inspiration for years to come. Making the book even more influential, all proceeds are donated to the Grand Street Settlement.

The year Sylvia returned to New York from Puerto Rico, she began traveling for supervisory training for Pfizer. One trip in 1982 took her to Kansas City where she met O.B. Taylor for the first time. In 1989, O.B. came to New York on a business trip, where the friends went to dinner and decided to date one another. Still living and working 1,500 miles apart, the couple would spend the next 15 years getting to know one another and



"We treasure this irreplaceable family photo. We walked three miles each way to the photographer in town." Pictured: Eligia (mother), Cruz (father), Radames and Waldermar (brothers), Miriam and Elba (sisters) and Sylvia.



Sylvia and mother Eligia Montero



Sylvia and grandchildren Miranda, 13 and Kenny, 16

falling in love. In 2007, after they both retired from Pfizer, Sylvia and O.B. decided to get married. In 2008 they came to Sparta.

Here in town they worked with contractors and designers to build their perfect home. Sylvia and O.B. made connections all over town and in different communities. Together they do work with Newton Episcopal Church and Helping Hands, a program supporting elderly residents with a variety of projects.

"When we moved here, we knew we made the right decision. So many people that we met in the process of building our home became our friends."

Family is just as important as ever to Sylvia; her mother lives in an attached apartment to her home, keeping her close. More of her family lives in Staten Island, including her son with his wife and Sylvia's two grandchildren, Kenny and Miranda. Sylvia thanks her family for her success and strives to help more people to be successful.

There isn't a dull moment in retirement for Sylvia and O.B. though. From the countless good deeds, caring for their schnauzer, Max, to their three week outdoor adventures in Minnesota every summer that take them camping and canoeing, this couple may have retired from working, but they are always continuing the work to make other people's lives better.

"Too many people have interwoven their life with work. My job did not define me, but it helped me get to where I am today," says Sylvia. Always maintaining her moral center of integrity and optimism, Sylvia found success in the business world and in life.

Do you know a neighbor who has a story to share? Nominate your neighbor to be featured in one of our upcoming issues!

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