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Empowering latinas

Webzine Latinitas provides young women with reading, opportunity

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As she stood behind her booth at Dia de los Niños, a children's fair at the St. John's Branch Library on Saturday, Marcela Evans praised the motivation and the message of Latinitas, a webzine for Latina girls aged 9-20.

"The best thing about working with Latinitas is that you can really tell how much everyone cares," said Evans, a Latin-American studies senior. "Everyone is very welcoming and warm - it makes us care even more, too."

Evans and a group of volunteers and co-workers gave out prizes to children who came up to their booth and effectively "pinned the book in Maria's hand." Amidst the laughter and occasional cheating of the youthful participants, the band of young women with Latinitas magazine also handed out surveys and took names for their e-mail list, all to better their already highly praised magazine.

Latinitas, which celebrated its 1-year anniversary in January, carries a message of empowerment for Latina girls, not just in Austin, but all over the country.

Upon visits to the Web site, latinitasmagazine.com, Latina girls have access to a wide range of columns tailored to helping them understand problems in their daily lives.

Additionally, they have the opportunity to read columns by other Latina youth and write their own columns for the Web-based magazine, including book reviews, Web site reviews, personal stories and much more.

"Our Web site really gives something important to Latina girls, because unfortunately there is nothing else like us out there," said Alicia Rascon, co-founder of Latinitas magazine. "There are a lot of important issues facing Latina girls today, and we are very happy to give them another resource."

The Latino population in Austin makes up about 31 percent of the city's population, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Additionally, the 2000 census of the city of Austin put people aged 15 and younger as 19 percent of all residents. With the huge number of Latino people living in Austin, it seems necessary that a periodical be created to serve this community and its youth.

That is just what happened in spring 2002.

Alicia Rascon and Laura Donnelly began the initial phases of what would become Latinitas magazine in a journalism in Latin America class, taught by Professor Rosenthal Alves. Rascon and Donnelly, both journalism graduates from the University, researched the representation of Latina youth in the media and found a dramatic lagging of any kind of representation at all. With this finding, they decided to work on creating a magazine to fill that void and give empowerment to the Latina community



Robin Ewing, graduate journalism student, helps Dianna Lopez, age 8, with a game at the Latinitas booth at St. John's public library, Saturday. Latinita is a webzine for young Hispanic girls.

through a new online voice.

The webzine became fully operational in January 2003. They started small, focusing on Latina girls ages 9-to-14, and addressed issues of particular importance to the Latina community such as body image and health issues such as diabetes, which disproportionately affects Latina girls.

Although *Latinitas* magazine addresses serious issues affecting the Latina girls' community, Donnelly said that from the beginning, empowerment through involvement was just as important.

"Our vision was and is a magazine for girls by girls," Donnelly said.

Many organizations speak about involving their patrons in what they do, but *Latinitas* magazine has really made their vision come alive. In addition to receiving feedback at events like *Día de los Niños*, *Latinitas* magazine makes a very strong effort to get "their niñas" involved. They hand out surveys and flyers in many schools around Austin and have weekly after-school meetings at Martin Middle School to discuss things in the community and get the kids involved.

"It is really important for us to stay in tune with the community," said Maria Orta, an advertising junior and volunteer with *Latinitas*. "It lets us know what the girls want in the magazine and helps us do our job better."

In the online magazine, Latina girls will find something different every month. On its one-year anniversary, *Latinitas* added a teen section that targets girls ages 14 and up, which is now published bi-monthly, switching places with the pre-teen version that targets girls 9-to-14.

Jimena Ruiz, 12, said the online magazine is very interesting and fun, while her friend Samantha Salazar, 11, who just discovered its existence at *Día de los Niños*, wants to become involved.

"It looks fun," Salazar said. "I like to write, and maybe I can write for [*Latinitas*]."

The future for *Latinitas* has many things in store. Last summer they had a camp at the University along with the Junior League, and this summer will be the same. Additionally, they will have concerts over the summer, including poetry contests and other ways for their readers to show off their talents.

Latinitas also sponsors workshops and focus groups, specifically teen reporter training workshops at *Ventaña del Soul*, a youth center on Oltorf Road.

With all of these things going on now and in the future for *Latinitas* magazine, they still have an even bigger goal in mind: their first print edition. While they do not know when this will be happening, Rascon pointed out that being an online publication does come with certain advantages.

"We've had people from all over the place contact us about *Latinitas*," Rascon said. "We've gotten praise from teachers all over the country that see our webzine, and some have said they use it in their classes."

However, despite all the praise from "their niñas," teachers, and magazine and newspaper articles, Rascon highlighted one form of praise that made her feel particularly happy.

"The best praise is from the mothers of our niñas, when they say that they wished there was something like *Latinitas* for them when they were young. That really makes us feel like we're doing something great," Rascon said.

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