

# 40s

## LEADING A POWERFUL AGENCY UNDER PRESIDENT OBAMA'S ADMINISTRATION, **ALEJANDRA CASTILLO** HELPS MINORITY BUSINESSES THRIVE

**R**AISED BETWEEN TWO WORLDS, government executive Alejandra Castillo has come to accept—to leverage, even—her hyphenated, Dominican-American background. Serving as national deputy director of the Minority Business Development Agency (MBDA), she fights doggedly to connect minority companies to business opportunities. It's a fitting role, as she has spent much of her life analyzing socioeconomic factors that affect ethnic communities and enterprises.

Born in New York City to Dominican immigrants, Castillo often felt pulled in two different directions. She can't decide what was more jarring—undergoing a “reverse immigration” experience to the Dominican Republic (DR) as a young girl, or returning to NYC years later, as a young woman, speaking English with an accent.

While in the DR, Castillo endured personal crises, a “stranger within family,” she describes, trying to adapt and realizing how distinctly American she was. She also saw firsthand the corruption, strife, and poverty that pushed a large number of Dominicans, including her, to leave their country in the 1980s. “I returned to the United States at age 19 going on 35,” she says. “As I tried to reintegrate myself, I had to explain to

people that I was not an immigrant but in fact a New Yorker who had been away for eight years.”

Today, at 42, Castillo cites her Hispanic heritage as an asset in leading Minority Business Enterprises (MBEs) to commercial success. “As I travel around the country, being a woman and an ethnic minority provides me with a unique perspective,” says Castillo, whose Washington, DC-based agency boasts several new federal programs targeting MBEs. “I am able to identify certain nuances that may be overlooked because I have witnessed what ethnic populations and urban areas must consider when trying to access capital.”

MBDA is a strategic vehicle in President Barack Obama's administration to help minority companies grow in size and scale, regardless of how small—or big—they are at present. “The Obama administration understands that MBEs play a critical role in building economic prosperity and wealth creation among minority communities,” Castillo says, adding that they are uniquely positioned to fuel economic growth abroad. “MBEs are twice as likely as nonminority firms to export due to linguistic and cultural ties.”

In fact, the United States's 5.8 million minority businesses add more than \$1 trillion in gross receipts to the na-

### Looking Ahead

#### Where do you see yourself in the next decade?

“In the next decade, I see myself as the CEO or COO of a Fortune 500 company. It is my goal to continue to think strategically and provide companies with innovative approaches to management and business-growth strategies.”

### Looking Back

#### What advice would you give to yourself in your previous decade?

“I would recommend completing a post-graduate degree (such as a dual MBA/JD) and joining the board of a community nonprofit, serving on the audit or governance committees.”

### Best Year Ever

“In 2009, I received custody of two teenage nieces and became a first-time mother. Professionally, I transitioned from interim executive director of the Hispanic National Bar Association (where we supported the confirmation of the first Latina to the Supreme Court) and started my appointment in the Obama administration. Despite the challenges, 2009 demonstrated that opportunities come with tremendous demands for hard work and taking risks.”

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National Deputy Director, Minority Business Development Agency

tional economy, she says. MBDA assists minority entrepreneurs and business owners with a variety of needs including consulting services, contract and financing opportunities, bonding and certification services, as well as assistance in

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building business alliances and training executives. Such programs help usher them into the big leagues of business.

**PATH TO THE WHITE HOUSE**

For Hispanics to succeed in business, education “must become ingrained in our DNA,” Castillo says. The obstacle for her was that no one in her immediate family had navigated the US higher-education system effectively. “After graduating from high school, I knew I wanted to go to college but I just did not know what to do, where to go, how to apply, let alone how to pay for it. My education happened not because I had planned it, but because I was hungry for it,” she says.

Upon returning to the United States—via a yearlong study abroad program in Portugal—and without any college entrance preparation, Castillo walked into the admissions office of the State University of New York at Stony Brook and registered. As an undergrad, she majored in economics and political science, and in grad school, public policy. A perennial “thinker,” she was drawn to these analytical fields from an early age. “Who creates money? What determines the money supply? How do you optimize scarce resources?” she says, posing a series of the questions that propelled her studies.

Her first job out of college was as a writer/researcher for the Council on Hemispheric Affairs (COHA), a Washington, DC-based nonprofit that investigates

Latin America foreign policy. Working in the highly intellectual but “bare-bones operation” taught her to be resourceful and leverage her unique skills, such as fluency in Spanish and Portuguese.

In 1992, Castillo landed her first position in federal government. As a Congressional Hispanic Caucus Fellow, she worked in the Poverty and Health Office of the Labor and Human Resource Committee under the leadership of Senator Edward Kennedy. She was there at an exciting time, when newly elected President Bill Clinton made an increasing focus on social issues: HIV/AIDS, rural health care, and child immunization, among others.

Through the years, Castillo has risen to high ranks in public service. Mid-career, she completed a law degree,

which opened up many new doors, including working as interim executive director of the National Hispanic Bar Association. She served as senior policy advisor for the Office of National Drug Control Policy during the Clinton administration. In the Commerce Department’s International Trade Administration, as special advisor to the under secretary, she led business outreach, deepening her appreciation for goods stamped “Made in the USA.”

Clearly, Castillo has made a name for herself in government as a leader, a fighter, and an executive with an edge. With her specialized knowledge of trade law and business advisement, she is poised for a future in private industry—a challenge she says she would readily assume.