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The Reporter

Andes resident brings passion for diversity to DelCo



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Olga Abinader at her Andes home.
ELIZABETH DEFALCO/THE REPORTER

Posted Thursday, June 2, 2022 12:00 am

By Elizabeth DeFalco

DELAWARE COUNTY - Olga Abinader was born in the Dominican Republic but now lives in Andes and volunteers for Women For Inclusion Diversity and Equity (WIDE) in Delaware County - a social justice organization which believes in promoting inclusion and equality of all people through education, community outreach, and activism.

Abinader assisted in organizing a WIDE celebration in Delaware County for Hispanic History Month in 2021. Delaware County reminds her that the goal of promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion is never done, she said. "My experience living here helps me appreciate the challenges that members of underrepresented communities might have when they find that no one else looks like them, speaks like them, or has experienced a similar life journey."

Abinader emigrated with her family to Massachusetts in 1990 when she was seven years old. To keep close to her Caribbean heritage, Abinader and her family only spoke Spanish in their home, and she translated between English and Spanish for her family who were not as fluent in English. Abinader felt like a stranger, she said, when she started her life in the United States. In her career, Abinader said, she was focused to try to "recreate a sense of home that she had lost," and found excitement and a passion in urban studies.

She sought advice and mentorship through the strong, female leaders in her life. Her cousin was an attorney who had "made it" in the United States. She helped Abinader with college applications, and taught her how to take the SATs. "Being immigrants, we didn't always have all the answers on how to succeed," Abinader said. She said she felt like she would not be where she is today without the help and guidance of her cousin.

After high school, Abinader continued her education at Brown University where she graduated with a bachelor's degree in urban studies in 2005. Abinader also graduated from Harvard, earning a master's degree in urban studies in 2008. She moved to New York City, applying to as many open positions as she could.

Abinader was hired as a project manager at the environmental assessment and review division (EARD) at The New York City Department of City Planning, where she reviewed projects to ensure mitigation of significant adverse effects of projects in the public sector and transparency with project plans and accountability for any risks projects posed to the public.

Abinader, with the support of strong, female mentors she found in her career, worked her way up in the EARD through multiple positions, and defied doubts she felt from some of her peers. She applied for an open director's position at EARD after returning from maternity leave.

"I continued to believe in myself and thought, 'If not me, who else?'" Abinader said, and ultimately was hired for the position. She was among the youngest to ever hold the position at 35, and received the Joe Salvo Award for manager of the year the first year as director in 2019.

In a decision made to support her family, Abinader and her family permanently relocated to their Andes home in 2020, following the start Covid-19 pandemic.

Today, Abinader is Director of Environmental Review and Land Use Planning for Matrix New World - a woman-owned company of engineering and science experts who focus on some of the nation's most pressing long-term challenges, including climate change, resiliency, ecological restoration, contamination studies, water supply, disaster response, and urban revitalization, according to its website. Jayne Warne, president of Matrix, praised Abinader's role in her company. "As a woman-owned firm, Matrix takes pride in our dedication to diversity, leadership and inclusion. Olga Abinader is the perfect embodiment of all three of these traits and we were pleased to have her represent the company," Warne stated. Abinader felt Matrix was the perfect fit for her, and aligned with her personal values.

In addition, Abinader recently earned a seat on the panel of the Statewide Hispanic Chamber of Commerce in New Jersey event: The Art of Being a Modern Latina. Abinader engaged in discussion with other panelists on strategies for modern Latina women to be successful in various industries, diversity in the workplace, and their journeys in their respective fields. Accessible and diverse leadership is extremely important to Abinader, as strong women of color in leadership positions are who she credits her success to. Abinader felt as if she had a responsibility to be the same mentor she had, to women coming up in the workforce.

"A lot of blood, sweat, and tears went into my career. A lot of moments where I doubted myself, and a lot of conversations with mentors who reminded me everything is human, and coming from the background I did isn't a limitation," Abinader said. Her achievements are a blessing, she said, and she is grateful for everyone who has helped her along the way. "I also have the responsibility to pay it forward, if anyone has helped me get to where I am today, then it's my responsibility to help that next person."

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