

Community Leadership In Action

Sometimes community building can seem like a soft or abstract concept compared to the concreteness of shaping policies or pushing legislation. Reality is, however, that it takes a lot of strength to build a strong community. And the trust and strength created in a community is essential for it to thrive, especially in the face of a crisis. The pandemic laid bare many inequities, and the strength and resilience of our communities helped community members to persevere. Many community organizations stepped up to help, and no one more so than La Colaborativa and Executive Director, Gladys Vega. We were honored to recognize the exceptional efforts of Gladys and her team with the 2021 Social Justice Award recently at Eastern Bank Foundation's Celebration of Social Justice.

They say that experiences from our childhood are some of our most formative. This rings true for Gladys Vega. Born in Puerto Rico and moving to Chelsea with her family at the age of nine, she witnessed first-hand the challenges facing Latine residents. She experienced gentrification displacing residents, economic opportunity bypassing her neighbors, and deportation destroying families. These experiences steered in her a determination to bring justice, equity and opportunity to her community.

Gladys joined La Colaborativa in 1990, two years after its founding, as a Receptionist. She rose through the ranks and was promoted to Executive Director in 2006. Under her leadership, La Colaborativa serves as a consistent, trusted and fearless partner for the Latine community in Greater Boston, with a focus on Gateway Cities and towns such as Chelsea, East Boston, Everett, Lynn, Revere and Malden. La Colaborativa partners with residents and legislators alike to drive policy and system changes that benefit Latine communities in such areas as food and housing security, economic advancement, cultural celebration and community leadership. It serves as a trusted resource to Massachusetts' immigrant community, including immigrants, undocumented families, and low-income tenants and workers.

Throughout her time in the organization, Gladys methodically and intentionally has gotten to know her neighbors. She has worn many hats and built relationships, for example, as a tenant organizer and immigrant rights advocate, so that when she rose to her current position, she was an already familiar and trusted resource. And in her leadership role, she had wherewithal and the deep knowledge to drive La Colaborativa's mission to address the needs identified by the community.



Gladys Vega, Executive Director of La Colaborativa. Photo Credit: Marilyn Humphries.

During the pandemic, many communities La Colaborativa serves became hot spots for the rapid spread of the COVID-19 virus. Systemic issues of racism, immigration policy, healthcare access, overcrowded housing and food insecurity were exacerbated, and brought to the forefront. Gladys refused to let her communities be left behind to fight the disease alone.

Taking action came quickly because an entire ecosystem already knew and trusted Gladys and La Colaborativa – from people living in local neighborhoods, to legislators, public service leaders, philanthropists, healthcare providers, and more. She and the entire La Colaborativa team were important linchpins to vital resources, by helping keep individuals and families fed and housed, securing medical care and providing vaccine education and distribution, as well as helping employees and employers alike stay afloat. They turned communities in despair into areas of safety. Her leadership has:

- Resulted in expanded rights for immigrants, low-income families, tenants, workers, youth and people of color across Massachusetts.
- Positioned La Colaborativa at the forefront of state and local efforts to meet the tremendous needs of Latine residents across Massachusetts during the pandemic, when Chelsea and surrounding areas experienced overlapping public health, unemployment, housing and hunger crises.
- Enabled La Colaborativa's model for community health distribution through

local leadership, grassroots outreach and community participation which has led to communities in Massachusetts transforming from having the highest COVID-19 transmission rates to having among the highest vaccination rates. La Colaborativa's team went door-to-door and neighbor-to-neighbor, to reach individuals and families with information about resources available to them and the importance of getting vaccinated. In other areas of support, La Colaborativa created a pop-up food pantry – on the front porch of Gladys' home – providing over 10,000 pounds of food to the community.

These significant achievements demonstrate the deep strength Gladys has provided to her community and the strength she receives back from the community to continue the work. And it's why we're especially proud to recognize Gladys with the 2021 Social Justice Award. Now in its 33rd year, this award continues to recognize community leaders who have made an outstanding impact in addressing critical social justice issues. Gladys works relentlessly and boldly to ensure the Latine community has a voice in determining how its needs and concerns are addressed, and she grounds her work in trust.



Nancy Huntington Stager is a recognized leader in corporate citizenship and President and CEO of the Eastern Bank Foundation.