

Nydia Velázquez...The best is yet to come

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Fourteen years ago, a young woman from Barrio Limones of Yabucoa, Puerto Rico, took the oath of office as the member of Congress from the 12th Congressional District of New York. Before being elected to Congress, she had served as Secretary of the Department of Puerto Rican Community Affairs, an agency created during my administration to serve Puerto Ricans living in the U.S. mainland.

I could not have found a better person to head this agency. She had brains, she had heart and she had guts. I had met her in Puerto Rico when she was a professor at the Humacao Campus of the University of Puerto Rico. She impressed me on account of her commitment to principle on matters such as social justice and civil rights. It was quite clear to me she had courage and a relentless determination. She did not strike me, and never has, as a person with ambition for office for the sake of ego, but rather with ambition for office to serve others and give life to her principles.

To maximize the results the department was meant to achieve, we made a strategic decision. We would focus our efforts on empowering Puerto Ricans through voter registration in those communities having a large percentage of Puerto Ricans. *Atrévete* was the name of the program, which we developed for this purpose. It was a challenge to Puerto Ricans who refused to involve themselves in the workings of democracy and government. It had a spectacular success.

Although Nydia gained considerable recognition as secretary, I was taken aback when she informed me she intended to resign to run for Congress and to challenge none other than Steven Solarz. A long-time member of the Democratic majority in Congress, Solarz had become an icon as chairman of the House Foreign Relations Committee. Nobody gave Nydia a chance against this entrenched congressman. But Nydia was determined to fight in the primary and I supported her no matter what the outcome might be. On election night, she won a stunning upset and New York politicians suddenly became aware of the tremendous strength of this wiry *jibarita* from Barrio Limones of Yabucoa.

Fourteen years have passed since she took the oath of office in Congress for the first time. She has served when the Democratic Party has been in the majority as well as the minority but she has always stood for principle, always has had the courage of her convictions and never has forgotten to serve the interest of her constituents in the 12th District of New York. In those 14 years, she has come a long way. She has risen in stature and in leadership well beyond her district into the affairs of the nation.

As the first Latina to occupy a full committee chairmanship, Nydia will head the Small Business Committee. She is also a member of the Steering Committee, which has the authority to appoint committee members and set policy for the House of Representatives.

As the new chairwoman for the Small Business Committee, she will energetically oversee the Small Business Administration (SBA), the federal agency charged with the responsibility of helping the U.S. and Puerto Rico entrepreneurial sectors through its \$200 billion loan, contracting and assistance programs. In addition, just last week, a rules package was passed in Congress that expands the reach of the committee to review those pieces of legislation that impact small businesses. This action provides a greater voice to small businesses in Congress and ensures their needs are being considered in the legislative process. Also under the committee's purview is ensuring all federal agencies are complying with the small business contracting goals. These goals ensure the federal government receives the highest-quality products and services for the best savings of the taxpayer dollars.

Over the next two years, Chairwoman Velázquez will have the opportunity to work on behalf of the nation's 26 million small businesses, making an effort to improve the overall economic environment. The success of local economies as well as the U.S. economy depends heavily on the vitality of small businesses, which are responsible for creating up to 80% of all new jobs and spurring economic development.

One theme Chairwoman Velázquez has consistently been concerned about is how to make it easier for entrepreneurs and small businesses to get information, advice and ample access to capitalize their efforts to get a successful venture off the ground. Programs such as the Federal & State Technology Partnership Program (FAST), which aims to strengthen the technological advancements of small firms, have not received the funding necessary to fulfill their objectives. Another concern is the dwindling access to capital. Entrepreneurs who utilize the SBA's largest long-term lending program, 7(a), have had to pay double for financing, and have been receiving smaller loans. These types of barriers make it difficult for small businesses to expand and require action to address these concerns.

Although Nydia is the representative for New York's 12th congressional district she is also the daughter of a *Borinquen*, and as such is always thinking of her brethren on our island. The small-business community here in Puerto Rico can be assured Chairwoman Velázquez will be a partner in working with them to find solutions to the problems that impact them most, as well as the entrepreneurs throughout the country.

For a number of small businesses, particularly here in Puerto Rico, adequate access to disaster assistance is a top concern. In order for small businesses to recover following a disaster, they must have access to disaster loans through the SBA. Following Hurricane Katrina, impacted entrepreneurs were hit with long delays, bureaucratic issues and, a year later, 80% of those who had been promised assistance had yet to receive the funds. Chairwoman Velázquez will be working to revamp the disaster loan program to ensure businesses in the future are prepared to deal with disasters and are able to access efficient assistance through the SBA afterward. Making changes to the program will ensure small firms impacted by future disasters have access to the assistance they need to make a full recovery.

Small businesses are the lifeblood of the economy. Chairwoman Velázquez's commitment to meeting the needs of this vital sector is unwavering and, in the coming two years, she will be working to address its most pressing concerns.

During the coming years, Nydia Velázquez will be an important player in U.S. national affairs. In her current position, she will come into maturity in her political career. Her best is yet to come.

