Leading with heart: An alumna’s community-centered approach to business

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Alejandra Guzman (MBA ’12) is chief operating officer of LSU Health Foundation, a New Orleans non-profit that provides funding for science-based education, research, scholarships and outreach.

Alejandra Guzman (MBA ’12) has worked in a wide variety of workplaces, both internationally in mega-corporations and locally in New Orleans non-profits. No matter where her job takes her, she has one goal: to improve lives.

“I’ve always been drawn to the human aspect of business,” she says. “And I want to do good in the world.”

As Chief Operating Officer of LSU Health Foundation, a New Orleans non-profit that provides funding for science-based education, research, scholarships and outreach, Guzman is doing just that. While overseeing the foundation’s day-to-day internal

administration, including accounting, HR, systems accountability and property management, she never loses sight of the larger goal.

“If I viewed my job as only focused on processes, that would be a very limited perspective,” she says. “At the end of the day, I want to grow the LSU Foundation’s endowment so that we can continue to benefit the New Orleans community, and ultimately, I want my team to be inspired by how our work contributes to the greater good.”

Guzman, who was born in Michigan and grew up in Monterrey, Mexico, has spent her career uplifting communities. Take, for example, the 10 years she spent at CEMEX, a multinational Mexican building materials company, where she worked on housing, sustainability and public-private partnership initiatives.

“When I was living in Mexico, I saw a lot of poverty, and I didn’t want to go blind to that,” she says. “CEMEX’s corporate social responsibility program touched my heart. It was there that I learned through business, you can do good for communities.”

Guzman played a key role executing and improving CEMEX’s renowned Patrimonio Hoy program, which for 27 years has provided underserved communities with access to expert building advice, information on microfinancing and building materials to construct dignified housing.

“For this project we were working to help very poor communities,” she says. “I visited families of eight who were living in a single room with a dirt floor. CEMEX came in with construction packages and expert construction advice. We would train the families on outdoor construction techniques and support them as they built homes.

“The program truly changed the lives of people rebuilding after natural disasters, and it helped people without housing create homes for themselves.”

As of 2022, over 3 million individuals have benefited from Patrimonio Hoy. To recognize the program’s innovative approach to affordable housing, the United Nations honored CEMEX with a UN-Habitat Business Award, and Stanford and Harvard created business case studies so other companies could learn from the Patrimonio Hoy model.

Patrimonio Hoy is just one of many corporate responsibility programs that Guzman has contributed to. She's also worked on projects that provide educational access to children with disabilities and vocational training to at-risk youth.

Guzman is deeply gratified by these service projects, but she is also quick to point out a business imperative underlies each.

"To create and sell these programs, you have to fit them into an organization's overall mission and strategy," she says. "At the end of the day, somebody has to pay for these projects. That's where the business acumen becomes relevant."

To develop that business savvy, Guzman turned to Freeman, where she earned an MBA and, perhaps most importantly, developed a wholistic mindset that would help her throughout her career.

"When I started the MBA program, I was coming from a very fast-paced corporation," she says. "I wanted to pay my dues, get my MBA and go back to Mexico to work my way up the corporate ladder.

"Once I was here, though, I realized that there's a way to have a meaningful career while still enjoying culture and life. New Orleans has that soulful feeling that just elevates you. It's the people, it's the food, it's the festivals and culture. You can't do business without soul. That's my conclusion from being in New Orleans for the past 15 years."

In the MBA program, Guzman met lifelong friends — and her now-husband Barrett Cooper (MBA '13), founder of the private investment company NOLA Capital partners. Together, Guzman and Cooper have made New Orleans their home, and Guzman says that the addition of their daughter has only reaffirmed their commitment to enhancing the quality of life in the city through development projects and community service.

Guzman says the five years she spent working at the New Orleans Business Alliance opened her eyes to the city's pain points and prompted her to reflect on how to meet those needs.

"My work at the New Orleans Business Alliance gave me the opportunity to understand the challenges New Orleans is facing whether it's infrastructure, transportation, or attracting new residents and expanding our tax base. It also gave

me a better idea of what’s needed for the city to succeed.”

Today, Guzman is helping solve some of the city’s challenges by lending her expertise to organizations like the Urban Land Institute, the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of Louisiana and the Sewerage and Water Board. Most recently, she was invited to join Mayor Helena Moreno’s transition team, where, as a member of the Economic Development Committee, she will help shape policy for the Mayor’s first 100 days in office.

“This is the kind of work that inspires me,” Guzman says. “I feel very proud that I have an opportunity to create positive change in our community. It’s a blessing.”