

Nelida Valentin, Stockton University, Class of 1986

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As a young girl growing up on Bloomfield Avenue in Newark, Nelida Valentin focused on getting things done. Her father was absent from her life; her mother spoke very little English. “We were poor, but my mother somehow made it all work,” she said.

Nelida never fully understood what was possible in her life, nor how much she was capable of doing. That dynamic changed, she said, the day she set foot on Stockton University’s campus. She became part of Stockton’s Educational Opportunity Fund (EOF) “family” whose nurturing adults included Jean Jones, Daisy Rios, and the program’s director Harvey Kesselman, now president of Stockton University. “These adults on campus served as my role models,” she said. “They helped me understand what is possible. They paved the way for me to see pathways that could be open to me. They were serious about their work, and extremely talented and professional, while caring and constructive to students in their care.”

The Stockton alumna (1986) recently assumed two prestigious responsibilities that bear little resemblance to her job in high school as a cashier at Burger King in Newark. Nelida became a member of Stockton’s Board of Trustees (December 2016). In July 2016, she joined the leadership team of the Princeton Area Community Foundation as vice president of grants and programs. Prior to her PACF vice president position, her employment included: director, New Jersey Institute of Technology’s Innovation Institute; director, the Thomas Edison State College (now University) Center for Leadership Development during which time she launched Leadership Trenton; and executive director of the Newark Workforce Investment Board.

Her time spent in corporate offices throughout New Jersey is certainly a world away, but geographically not far away, from the Newark welfare office at 32 Green Street, where she spent a good deal of her youth.

“Starting at the age of about seven or eight, I would accompany my mother to the welfare office. I served as translator for my mother who spoke only Spanish and had an elementary school education. There were no Spanish-speaking social workers at the welfare office in those days. I helped my mom navigate all the paperwork and fill out the forms. I learned a lot from doing this – how to speak to officials, get answers to questions, be organized with documentation. I had no role models for me to follow when I applied for jobs, but getting through the public assistance bureaucracy and the onerous requirements was great training,” she said.

The road leading to Stockton from the streets of Newark was a bumpy one, but one ultimately paved with amazingly good fortune. At Newark’s Barringer High School, “there was one counselor

Mrs. Cohen who made me her project – looked after me and told me that I would be college prep, not secretarial prep a track I was on after moving back to Newark with my mom and attending high school in Puerto Rico. Because of Mrs. Cohen, I applied to five colleges – but never told my mom what I was doing. My mom is the oldest of seven. No one in my family attended college,” she said.

“I got into all five, but chose Stockton because it offered the largest scholarship. Plus, there was an EOF summer boot camp with housing. Since I was the first one in my family to go to college, the concept of leaving home for school was foreign to my family. My mom learned I was on my way on a late summer day in 1982, as I packed a friend’s car for the trip to Pomona. My boyfriend’s parents were kind enough to volunteer to take me to Stockton. When they dropped me off at the EOF program that summer, my life was transformed forever,” said Nelida, who graduated with honors with a BA in business studies and then went on to get a master’s degree in political science and public policy from Rutgers University.

From the very first day, Nelida felt welcomed, valued, and was exposed to a “phenomenal new environment with so many inspiring intellectual and physical influences, including something as basic as exercise and fitness,” said Nelida, who developed a passion for running thanks to Jean Jones and EOF boot camp.

“I am extraordinarily pleased that Nelida is joining the board,” said President Harvey Kesselman, who has known her since 1982, when he was EOF director. “She has a unique perspective as an alumna with expertise in grants, community service, Hispanic affairs, social and economic development initiatives, and programs connecting students to the workforce. We welcome her home to Stockton, and we intend to take full advantage of her exceptional skills and experience on behalf of our students and the entire community.”

A resident of Trenton and mother of a 17-year-old son, Emilio, Nelida said “college is a passage to adulthood for urban youth from low-income families where opportunities and role models may not exist State colleges and universities are pathways for learning and growth, paving amazing opportunities that can shape a young person’s future.

“National data show that higher education, including the attainment of a degree and high-quality credentials, is key to our national and international competitiveness.

“Personally, I would not have achieved a career trajectory full of such challenging and positive experiences as I have enjoyed without a college degree. Stockton gave me the tools to grow and experience education with as wide a lens as possible; to project a future of unlimited possibilities I am pleased to serve and to have an opportunity to give back to society through both my work on the Stockton Board and my work at Princeton Area Community Foundation.”

PACF, with more than 120 million dollars in assets, has a mission of promoting philanthropy to advance the well-being of our communities forever with a goal of achieving meaningful impact in the region of Mercer County and surrounding communities. Many people are unaware, said Nelida, that one out of six Mercer County children live in poverty and the county ranks 14th out of New

Jersey's 21 counties for child well-being. "I am so pleased to be at the Community Foundation at a time in which we are creating a laser focus on children and adolescents living in poverty, in addition to our broad work in philanthropy and advocacy," she said.

"I intend to carry my Stockton lessons to every aspect of my personal and professional life and work on changing the New Jersey landscape for the better."