

Hispanic Heritage Month Employee Spotlights

Conning celebrates the achievements, contributions and inspiration of Hispanic-Americans in our communities and around the world. In honor of Hispanic Heritage Month, we're highlighting three of our Hispanic-American employees. Get to know them below.

Carlos Figueroa Portfolio Management, Conning



Can you give us some background on your family heritage?

My mother was born and raised in Peru. She was born in a small town called Huacho, which is two and half hours north from the capital, Lima. She decided to immigrate to the United States in 1998 with my older sister. I was born in the United States but grew up in a Peruvian household. My mother taught me what it means to be Peruvian and passed down her customs and traditions to my sister and me. One of the main priorities my mother had was to make sure

that we were fluent in Spanish (speaking, reading, writing). We would speak Spanish at home and speak English at school. That exposure was crucial in my upbringing as it allowed me to connect closer with my Peruvian roots and to have an advantage in work environments.



Carlos with his mother and sister.

What does Hispanic Heritage Month mean to you?

Hispanic Heritage Month means a significant amount to me because it serves as a reminder about who I am and where my family comes from. As much as I have grown up in American culture, being Peruvian is still a huge part of who I am, and I want to continue to learn about Peruvian history. It is also great to see that we are celebrating diversity in the United States because it promotes inclusivity within our societies.

I have only been able to visit Peru once back in 2016, but I am eager to return to see family and friends. It is something I want to do as soon as I can.

Who would you say was your greatest influence on your academic/professional career thus far?

My greatest influence on my academic/professional career has been my older sister Stephanie. Growing up with her as a role model academically has pushed me to reach heights that I could not imagine. Her determination and aspirations to be successful motivated me to do the same. I would see the awards she would earn, and it would push me to not only match her success but to surpass them. Without her guidance and advice, I do not know where I would be. She has had to overcome numerous hurdles in her life and has done so gracefully. The example she has given me has been nothing short of remarkable. I definitely consider myself lucky that she is a part of my life.



Carlos with his sister.

Paula A. Smith Business Development, Conning



Can you give us some background on your family heritage?

My mother was born in Bogota, Colombia and my father was born in the United States to parents who had just migrated from Colombia. Both of my grandparents on my father's side are first generation immigrants with hopes of achieving the American dream. As an adult, my father temporarily moved to Colombia to teach English at a local university, while getting to know his homeland and extended family. During that time period, my parents met and eventually got married!

I was born in Colombia and moved to the United States when I was 3 years old. My father knew that moving back to the United States would be the best decision for the family. We moved to Central Florida, where I was raised in a wonderful home with my brothers. My mother became the first in her family to migrate to the U.S. and that encouraged one of my aunts to move with her family as well.

What does Hispanic Heritage Month mean to you?

Hispanic Heritage Month is a month where I am reminded of my Colombian history and culture, as well as my family that lives in Colombia. I've lived in the United States since I was a 3 years old, so I've been primarily raised in an American culture, without much exposure to my Colombian roots. However, I am reminded this month to learn, enjoy and celebrate what it means to be Colombian.



Paula with her daughter and husband.

Now that I am married and have a daughter, we want to ensure that she is raised celebrating her Colombian heritage as well. One of our primary goals as parents, is to make sure she is raised in a bilingual home learning both English and Spanish. This will help her connect with her culture and communicate with her extended family. Our daughter is only 20 months old, and already understands and is starting to speak in both languages.

Who would you say was your greatest influence on your academic/professional career thus far?

My parents have obviously had a huge influence on my life, they've encouraged me and cheered me on every step of the way. I wouldn't be where I am without them. However, I would say my grandfather (on my dad's side), has been a primary influence on my academic and professional success. When he migrated to the U.S. with my grandmother, he fought hard to learn English and get acclimated to a new and unfamiliar world. He educated himself by attending the local community college and earned a certificate in technology. He worked hard to build a career and own his own consulting business. When he had grandchildren, he invested in college funds for us all. I was able to successfully graduate from the University of Florida debt-free as a first-generation college student thanks to his hard work and intentionality to help me succeed academically. My grandfather also encouraged me to seek a career in the financial industry, and still challenges me to continue to grow.



Paula with her daughter.

George Duarte Business Development, Octagon



Can you give us some background on your family heritage?

I was born in Havana, Cuba in 1959, the year Fidel Castro's revolution took control of the island nation. It was governed initially under a wildly popular socialist banner, however, it didn't take very long for his revolution to take a turn. With many families making tough choices, my parents and grandparents decided staying would not be in the best interest of their futures, or the future of my sister and me.



George with his wife and children in front of his paternal grandparents' home in Cuba.

They left Cuba with very little (all they could wear and hide) and we all came to the U.S. (Miami, of course!) for what was expected to be a short time period, thinking the U.S. would not stand for a Communist regime 90 miles from its shores. Well, 60 years later my sister and I are still here, having raised our own families here. I recently was able to return to Cuba with my family for the first time since 1960. Unfortunately, my grandparents and parents never returned as strong ideological factors they held against the regime they felt forced them out, to their last days on earth, negated any thought of returning (although they always longed for the chance to go back).

What does Hispanic Heritage Month mean to you?

My family just recently spent time discussing our history and roots, and while we do this frequently, we take the time to remember my parents and grandparents who sacrificed everything they built and accomplished to provide "a better opportunity" for my sister and me. During our trip to Cuba, we all could plainly see the stark differences in political and economic freedom, and to this day discuss how important it is to work hard, take advantage of opportunities afforded to us as well as those we want to pursue, but most importantly, the need to pay things forward. As we reflect on the past, our roots, and heritage, we make it a point of pride and duty to help others embarking on their journeys. My children mentor young Hispanic children in their communities via the Big Brother/Big Sister organization or volunteer work at community centers or soup kitchens offering a broad array of services to families suffering from economic hardships...so many of them and so close to home! Hispanic Heritage provides an opportunity to rejoice in our collective success as an ethnic community, recognize those who have climbed the difficult ladder to success against the odds, but more importantly, help those like us that are currently on the journey. We luckily were able to navigate through turbulent waters!



George with his wife and children at his paternal grandparents' home in Cuba.

Who would you say was your greatest influence on your academic/professional career thus far?

Definitely my parents and grandparents as they were hyper focused on education. They constantly reminded me that what you learn, what you know, unlike physical possessions, can NEVER be taken away from you. Work hard, study, get the best education you can possibly aspire to receive. I attended a high school in Miami whose students were (and to this day still are) informed predominantly by Cubans. The educators and counselors (mostly Cubans as well) who also immigrated to the U.S. during the 1960's and 1970's, were also all focused on education, so much credit to them as well.

My wife and I have four children and we are so proud (as my parents and grandparents would be) that they all attended and graduated from universities/colleges of their choice, and are healthy, productive and independent adults. Four children, four colleges/universities, four Hispanic young adults looking to give back. Lastly, the best advice my grandfather gave me was if you ever "made it", carry a lot of money in my pocket as "you never know when you have to leave the country in a hurry!"