

Generations of Excellence

Amanda Casanova

11'Jul'14

Texas neurologist, Pedro Nosnik, achieves the American dream through success with personal strides and partnership with his son.

In a medical center in Plano, Texas, Dr. Pedro Nosnik's name is featured in the middle of a large directory of other medical offices. For the Mexico native, the sign, signifying his private medical practice, testaments to a dream come true.

Some 1,500 miles away in New York, Nosnik's name is featured again — this time spelled backwards as part of a joint business venture with his son. It is also a dream come true, Nosnik said.

For Nosnik, the American dream was twofold: building a career as a doctor and building a business from scratch.

“Some people say that when you're 17 or 18 you don't what you're going to do, but at that time, I knew,” Nosnik said. “I just had an interest in both medicine and business.”

For a few months after graduating high school in Mexico City, Nosnik started accounting school, but still, he was intrigued by the complexities of the brain, so he enrolled in the National University Autonoma de Mexico. He graduated and moved to the United States in the late 1970s, where he started training in internal medicine in Maryland.

Later, he completed neurology training at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical School, and finally, in 1991, Nosnik started his own private practice.

Then, about three years ago, Nosnik and his youngest son, Steven, launched Kinson, a New York and New Jersey importer and distributor of wines

from all over the world. It's much different than his past business ventures. In 2004, he founded the Head and Spine Institute of Texas, a company that is lauded for its work in intraoperative neurophysiology, a process that monitors the nerves, spine and brain of a patient during surgery.

He also operates a private practice, where he diagnoses and treats neurological disorders ranging from headaches to spinal cord problems. But Kinson, a small business started from a deep love of wine and sheer ambition, is something Nosnik has always wanted to be part of.

"It just makes me very proud to contribute to American society," he said. "The business aspect is a challenge. It's a challenge to grow something, to put a little seed and see the plant, the tree grow up. You start from nothing, and you grow more and more. I think it's very rewarding for people who do that."

Nosnik said he loves business because, like medicine, it challenges him.

"There's so much satisfaction in seeing it grow," he said. "You create a new place for people to be and to make a living.

It's a new opportunity.

"In medicine, it's a great sensation when we have a difficult case, and the reward is that you help the patient and that you have done something good."

In nearly 34 years of private practice, Nosnik has earned D Magazine's recognition as one of the best doctors in Dallas for his work in neurology. He is consistently regarded as one of the most talented experts in his field and one of the most sought out.

A few weeks ago, a patient who remembered Nosnik from nearly 20 years ago came in to visit, telling Nosnik he had looked up the specialist for a reason.

"He said he came in to see me because he felt comfortable with me," Nosnik said. "I last saw this patient in the '90s, and he still remembered me. "I

have to be thankful for my Latin background that gave me understanding of the human element,” he said. “It taught me how to look at patients not as objects. That makes you successful when you know what you’re doing and when you make them comfortable.”

In an age where some value efficiency over quality, Nosnik said he’s staying traditional.

“There’s a lot of pressure on physicians on how to best provide medical services,” he said. “Time is money, and that gives less time for doctors to spend with patients. I really believe that the human side is very important.”

It’s something Nosnik learned from mentors and family in Mexico and something both he and his wife, Ani, have passed on to their own three children, Leah, Israel and Steven.

“There’s a warmth of living in Mexico,” he said. “People are welcoming, open. I grew up in that environment where people care about relationships and about other people. The Latin culture brings that warmth in American society.”

He said one of the greatest lessons he’s learned is the value of hard work and making the most of opportunities— whether in business, medicine or any field.

“Jorge Cervantes, one of my mentors, told me once, ‘Pedro, we all get opportunities passing in front of our eyes. The successful one is one who recognizes the opportunity and grabs it. The non-successful one is the one who will never recognize the opportunity.’ “I will never forget that.”

Star-Crossed Starling: Brina Palencia

Amanda Casanova

19'Mar'14

In the CW Television Network show, “Star-Crossed,” Brina Palencia plays one of a handful of alien teenagers who crash landed on earth and are caught between alien and human culture.

Palencia, whose father is Honduran, has been caught in between cultures before — albeit earthly ones— making the role a perfect fit. As a child, the 30-year-old balanced her time between summers in Honduras with her father and life in the United States with her mother.

She attended school in Oklahoma but also spent the fifth grade in a Honduran school.

In “Star-Crossed,” which premiered in February, Palencia plays Sophia, the alien sister to Roman, who has in “Romeo and Juliet”-like form fallen in love with a human.

“(My character) deals with being an outcast,” Palencia said. “Her hope was to find more friends in the human world. The difference between her and the other aliens is that she is positive and loves human culture, whereas others like her don’t want to integrate.”

The show tells the story of the Atrians, aliens who crash their ship in Louisiana and are sent to an internment camp. Ten years later, Atrian teenagers, who look just like humans, are forced to integrate into a local high school.

It was a role Palencia understood.

“When I was younger, I thought I was always different,” Palencia said. “Now that I’m older, I just see that it means I’m awesome and unique, and it’s good to be unique.

“It helps with my acting,” she added. “I have a lot more to draw from.”

Palencia’s most notable work stems from her voice-over skills in Japanese anime and video games. She’s voiced characters from children to boys and creatures and monsters for Funimation Entertainment/OkraTron 5000, a television and film production company based in Flower Mound, Texas.

“I’ve always liked anime,” she said. “My favorite American animated series is ‘Batman: The Animated Series’ because it’s really dark, and adult things happen in it. And in anime, that’s just the standard. They say things that are really profound and deal with dark things.

“I love animation because you get to experience really cool artwork, and you get a meaty story,” she added.

The University of North Texas music major has also had her hands in music directing by adapting anime songs from Japanese into English. She has also directed shows.

“I did theater in high school and college,” Palencia said. “I never really had plans in general as far as what I was going to do with my life. I knew I wanted to do something to do with music or acting because those were my two passions.

“I didn’t want to do just anime,” she said. “I love anime and voicing, but I wanted to expand my horizons, so I quit directing and went to full-time acting.”

The Oklahoma native snagged a few small roles in independent films and most recently earned screen time on AMC’s hit show “The Walking Dead.”

“That was a dream come true,” she said. “I love that show. It was amazing.”

She said her work on the small screen has allowed her to develop the characters she plays unlike movies, which are limited by time.

“You get to explore the character a lot longer,” she said. “On TV, there is a whole new experience for the character each episode, so you get to flesh out this whole other being in a different way than movies.”

Palencia said she keeps a busy schedule, but she doesn’t plan on slowing down.

“I’d like to do more TV and maybe bigger films and just do more stuff that challenges me as an actor,” she said. “It’s important to me that I never get stuck doing just one thing. That’s what I like about anime. I get to voice crazy little kids, adults and play boys at the same time. I don’t have a favorite type of character. I get really bored really fast, so my hope is to become as varied in on camera work as I am in voice work.”

“Star-Crossed” airs Mondays on the CW Television Network at 7 p.m. central.

The Protector: Robert Nuño

08'Nov'13

Amanda Casanova

Twelve-year-old Dylan Nuño showed up for career day at his school dressed in what he wanted to be when he grew up. Only it wasn’t a fireman or doctor or

even the president. Instead, outfitted in a suit, Dylan wanted to be a financial advisor, just like his dad, Robert Nuño.

“His teacher said he was very cute,” Nuño said, laughing.

For Nuño, it’s a high compliment and a testament to what he is trying to teach his three children about hard work. He, along with his wife, Lily, have two other sons besides Dylan: Adrian, 29, and Nick, 23.

“I knew if I was ever going to do something, it was up to me,” Nuño said. “This is a land of opportunity, not a land of handouts. I was given opportunities in my life, but I also worked hard.

“You don’t become successful by not working,” he said. “You have to go out and get it.”

Soldier on

They say there are four skills that develop in military personnel: leadership, creativity, problem-solving and decision-making.

People who know Nuño will say he boasts all those skills and more. After all, he served as an officer in the US Army specializing in Nuclear, Biological and Chemical (NBC) defense while on active duty.

Today, Nuño, who is an advanced planning specialist with Northwestern Mutual, isn’t dealing with classified military files, but that doesn’t mean he’s stopped helping to protect people—that is, he now helps protect people’s financial future by guiding them on managing their finances and helping them find clarity in their financial decisions.

As a Wealth Management Advisor, Nuño helps his clients design customized plans to fund their retirement, investment, risk management, business succession and other important financial goals.

“My military background has a significant influence on my work,” Nuño said. “I help people identify what their mission is and help them figure out how to reverse engineer a clear path to help them get there.

“Achieving financial security is a challenging and lifelong goal,” he said. “You must have a road map, a game plan, to get there. You have to anticipate and know where the “enemies” and obstacles may come from and know what to do. I’m here to help them articulate the concepts and strategies to carry out their mission.”

Nuño’s explanations are spotted with military jargon— a lingering reminder of his time spent in the Army. It might seem a strange route to take from military to financial planning, but for Nuño, he says it’s the best fit for him.

“It was the best opportunity for me,” he said. “I love my work.”

A Career Change

Nuño was born in Cuba before coming to the United States in 1961. His father stayed behind, hiding from the Castro government for six months and then rejoining his family in South Florida.

He attended Spring Hill College in Alabama and then transferred to the University of Miami with an army scholarship. He wanted to become a veterinarian, but that soon changed.

“I went from science to business,” he said. “I realized I didn’t have the brains for it, so I decided to become a businessman.”

But in 1983, Nuño went on active duty, developing training, tactical and logistics programs for the military.

“It was a very interesting job,” he said.

He left the military a captain, decorated with medals and honorably discharged and started working as a wholesale brokerage consultant. Later, Northwestern Mutual, ranked one of the “World’s Most Admired” life insurance companies by *Fortune Magazine* in 2013, recruited him to work for them.

He has since been with the company for nearly 20 years.

“This business has stood the test of time,” he said. “This is a 155-plus year company with traditions that have been handed down through many generations. [Northwestern Mutual]’s focus is taking care of the client for a lifetime.

Other companies, everything is about compensation,” he added. “We focus on keeping the client en route to their goal.”

Impacting others

Today, Nuño lives and works in South Florida, a place the Cuban native says he can relate to.

“The language down here is Spanglish,” Nuño said. “Most of the people are very ethnic. The Hispanic culture is great. There really is a nice bond that immediately is there when you speak to someone in their language.

“Hispanics need to like the person they do business with,” he said. “We need to know the person. It’s a relationship-based business.”

“Providing clarity is what people tell me I do best,” Nuño said.

Nuño also speaks to groups about his business philosophy, where he tells people to “get hooked on impacting others.”

And he’s impacting his family, like in Dylan’s dream job of finance, and in the lives of his other sons. Adrian is a senior vice president for a bank. Nick is studying nursing.

“You have to have discipline,” Nuño said. “Love what you do. You have to love what you do. You have to work hard, never quit. Just keep going and eventually people are going to recognize you and your intentions, you and your nobility.”

A Tremendous Ride: Omar Khalaf

21'Oct'13

Amanda Casanova

Omar Khalaf’s dad is Jordanian. His mom Colombian. He married a Dutch woman and lives in Illinois, although he was born in California in a Spanish-speaking household. It was only natural then when Khalaf took a job working for Kraft , a company that has consistently been ranked among the nation’s most diverse workplaces. This year, for example, the company ranked 18th on DiversityInc’s Top 50 list of diverse businesses.

“People for the most part (at Kraft) are hardworking self-starters, and you don’t find that in a lot of industries,” he said. “We’re leading with our people and embracing diversity. We’re driving growth through innovation with products that make mealtime easier for moms and families. And our people are truly our competitive advantage. It’s a great diverse place for people of color and Hispanics to work at.”

The company employs about 23,000 employees in the U.S., Canada and Puerto Rico, with Khalaf serving as the group’s vice president of industry development.

But Khalaf didn’t land the top role by luck.

Years ago, Khalaf was a box boy working in a grocery store. Since then, he held a number of roles, including senior director of planning and insights and manager for the west area regional customers.

This year, Kraft promoted Khalaf to vice president of industry development. He focuses on two priorities in his role: customer relations and tapping into the Hispanic sales effort.

“I love the industry,” Khalaf said. “It’s one of those things where growing up you were always told to do something to its fullest, and if you don’t like what you’re doing, get out.

“But I fell in love with it, and it’s been a tremendous ride,” he added. “I never thought this would be something where I would land, but I kept on working hard and looking forward.”

Khalaf’s parents immigrated to America when his mother was five months pregnant. He was born in Lynwood, Calif., a city just 15 miles south of Los Angeles.

“(My parents) did anything and everything to be able to survive,” Khalaf said. “It’s one of those things where they worked hard to get us where we’re at.”

Khalaf graduated in 1990 from Long Beach State University in California with a degree in marketing. He worked for Nabisco, Inc. until Kraft acquired the company. He has since been with Kraft for more than 20 years in about 15 different positions.

“It’s been part luck and part lots of hard work,” he said. “It’s not about looking past the role. You always want to try to master each role before you look forward. You develop skills. You work hard at that specific position and then you move on.

“There were always different roles, but that’s basically what I’ve done in my career,” he said. “I learned that work ethic from my parents and a can-do attitude.” They’re the same values he said he wants to instill in his twin girls: Ava and Isabel.

“It’s family first,” Khalaf said. “Then it’s the whole work ethic and education. My parents sacrificed everything for education. They put us into private schools and they worked two jobs to pay the tuition. It was always about education and always about going to college.

“The same is going to be in my household,” he added. “It’s always family first, then work ethic and making sure they learn to work hard at everything and really focus on education.

” Khalaf calls his twins, who are four years old, a “melting pot” because they are half Dutch and a quarter Colombian and a quarter Jordanian. Khalaf and his wife, Heather, have both made sure that the two get a taste— literally— of Latino culture.

“It’s mostly about food in the Latino culture,” Khalaf said. “When I go home, my parents are always saying, ‘Sit down. Let me cook you something.’

“I’ve learned some recipes for Colombian food and I will cook that, and we’ll talk about the food,” he said. “I’m also trying to teach them some Spanish, but they’re four, so right now it’s mostly eating and experiencing.”

Khalaf said he also uses his Latino background in his job, particularly because he understands how Latinos are brand loyal buyers, citing a statistic that says 70 percent of Latinos in America buy the same brand again and again.

“We realize that the Hispanic population, that their voice is greater than the 18 percent population across the nation,” he said. “We see a billion-plus buying power in the Hispanic market. It’s fast-growing and more than likely they will buy the product if they know the brand.

“Our focus is getting that product in front of them,” he said.

According to Kraft, about 98 percent of North American household have Kraft brands in their refrigerators or pantries.

Kraft also has a supplier diversity program that actively partners with minority- and women-owned businesses to work as suppliers. In 2011, the company was inducted to the U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce Million Dollar Club.

Southwest Leadership Landing: Sonny Villarreal

25 Jul '13

By Amanda Casanova

In a south Texas town just 30 miles from the border, Sonny Villarreal was taught to have a deep love for family, work and tamales, and even though he is now working as an executive supervisor in the office of the CEO for one of the largest marketing agencies in the nation, Villarreal said he hasn't forgotten his upbringing.

“My parents may not have been able to teach us about business or politics,” the 29-year-old said. “But they showered us with love and instilled important values, which gave us the foundation to go out and accomplish anything we desired.”

Villarreal didn't have college savings when he left Harlingen, Texas for school in Houston. He didn't have an opportunity to study abroad or take a year off before starting college. Villarreal had attended high school in a district that was 87 percent Hispanic, where nearly 70 percent of the student body was economically disadvantaged.

Still, Villarreal said he made a commitment to college and graduated from the University of Houston with a degree in political science. He then uprooted and moved to Los Angeles to act. Among his big screen achievements, Villarreal had a minor role in the 2004 film *Friday Night Lights*. While in California, the Texas native also worked as a marketing director for a music label and started his own company.

A few years later, Villarreal left Hollywood to move back to a big city he already knew — Houston, where he married his wife whom he met while in California. He took a job with advertising agency Lopez Negrete Communications.

The job for the Hispanic marketing company was a chance for Villarreal to draw from his Mexican American upbringing and help produce creative ads geared toward Hispanics. Villarreal has worked at Lopez Negrete Communications for nearly two years and attributes his success largely to Alex López Negrete, himself.

“Not many people have the opportunity to work with a Bill Gates or a Steve Jobs, but that’s kind of how I see my job. Day in and day out, I get to bring my knowledge forth for one of the most dynamic ad agencies in the country and work directly with a true trailblazer, and my mentor – Alex López Negrete.”

“I just couldn’t be prouder to be a part of the Lopez Negrete team,” Villarreal said. “I get to work alongside advertising’s best and brightest during a very exciting time in our industry. The term ‘familia’ is used quite a bit when referring to our team and that’s exactly what we are – a big, hard-working family.”

The advertising agency first launched in 1985 out of the small townhouse of López Negrete and his wife, Cathy López Negrete. Today, the company boasts numerous awards, nearly 200 employees and a client list filled with names such as Walmart, Dr Pepper Snapple Group and Bank of America.

“I get to work with great people to create great work for great brands,” he said.

Lopez Negrete Communications is now the second-largest, independently-owned Hispanic firm in the nation and in 2012, the agency was ranked one of the nation's fastest growing private companies by *Inc. Magazine*.

The company has been able to capitalize on a growing Hispanic population. As the Hispanic community has surged ahead, so have the opportunities for young Hispanics, Villarreal said.

“As a Latino, we’re raised with all these great values,” he said. “Family is still important to us, religion is important to us, but I think we are learning new ways of thinking and the hurdles are becoming fewer and fewer, and that’s going to open so many doors in the future.

“It’s going to pave the way for an eventual Hispanic president or a groundbreaking Hispanic scientist. Things are starting to shift for Hispanics.”

In 2010, the Pew Hispanic Center reported that the number of Hispanics graduating from college was seven times higher than it had been in the 1970s. Also, more Hispanic students are opting for a science, math or engineering degree or continuing their education at medical school or law school.

“As Latinos, we have such rich values that have been passed on through countless generations,” Villarreal said. “But I think we’re right now at the threshold where those long-standing values are being infused with new ways of thinking, higher standards, groundbreaking public figures. This is the formula that we need to show our generation and future generations that all is, indeed, possible.”

And that’s exactly what Villarreal said he wants to do with his first child, who is expected later this year.

“Like with most people, I look back and recognize the great things my parents did, and the things they perhaps could have done differently,” Villarreal said. “You learn from those experiences and try to build the best road possible for your family.

“If one day my wife and I can look at our kids knowing that they have a solid relationship with the Lord, understand the concept of love, understand the importance of an education, and understand the value of hard work, I’ll think I’ll be one proud papa.”