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METRO SECTION



Wreck led her down new road

GP: Host of Spanish radio talk show aims to uplift her community



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PHOTOGRAPHER: NATHAN HUNSINGER/DMN

By BETH FREED / Special Contributor to The Dallas Morning News

From the wreckage of a traumatic car accident, Elvia Wallace-Martinez had no option but to reassess.

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Elvia departed from what she viewed as a materialistic path.

Her change of direction became the foundation for service to the community that Grand Prairie officials took time to honor May 16, declaring it Elvia Wallace-Martinez Day.

The crash in 1994 temporarily cost Ms. Wallace-Martinez the use of her legs. Shortly after, her marketing firm, Hispanic Advertising Enterprises, lost an important national bid.

In reading ***Un grito desesperado*** (*A Desperate Cry*) by Carlos Cuauhtémoc Sanchez, Ms. Wallace-Martinez found the inspiration to

move forward. With a teenage son to raise and a physical disability that left her feeling depressed, she said a prayer. "If you give me the use of my legs back, I will walk a different path." Even though she'd been involved with community projects at her church, Ms. Wallace-Martinez concluded that she was leading a materialistic life and that there was more she could do. From her experience as a translator in criminal court cases, she was all-too-familiar with the crippling effects of crime and drugs on Hispanic teenagers. She decided to address this crisis in her community.

Just before her accident, a radio station manager invited Ms. Wallace-Martinez to host a talk show. During her recovery, she planned the show and brainstormed workshops that could accompany it. *Debes Creer en Ti (Believe in Yourself)*, the first local Spanish-language talk show, hit the radio waves running. Every day, hundreds of calls flowed in, with concerns ranging from rebellious teenagers to abusive spouses.

"Honest to God, every call was a worry. Every single call was a desperate cry for help," she said.

Ms. Wallace-Martinez then issued a call to action.

"I said, on the air, the first 15 people to come to this restaurant would get a free enchilada dinner and be on the steering committee to bring Mr. Sanchez to Dallas," she said. "Well, close to 100 people came." In 1999, 4,000 families welcomed the author to Dallas for a discussion centered on family values, communication and respect.

Ms. Wallace-Martinez later helped found the nonprofit corporation "Debes Creer en Ti" in Irving. The community center offers immigrants many services, including English as a second language classes, GED, citizenship and finance classes, computer courses and parenting seminars.

While adults learn vocational and family skills, their children take part in Folkloric Arts Mentoring Amigos to explore culture, learn how to dance Mexican folklorico and find friendship and self-worth.

Ms. Wallace-Martinez, 58, became a U.S. citizen nine months ago. Also this month, the American Jewish Congress Southwest Region, which works for social justice, recognized her work with a Women of Spirit Award.

Ms. Wallace-Martinez hopes to expand her efforts to reach more people.

"We have a large Hispanic immigrant population here, so we're really excited about the idea of Ms. Wallace-Martinez spreading the programs from Irving to Grand Prairie," said Grand Prairie City Council member Rick Sala.

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