

The Price Group Summer 2021 Newsletter

# TPG TIMES

*staying connected*

## **Zara Marselian is a City Heights Hero Creating Innovative Programs in the Health Field**



Zara Marselian (right), CEO of La Maestra Community Health Centers and La Maestra Foundation with Rep. Susan Davis (left)

**Describe your career journey and how you found yourself the founder and CEO of La Maestra? How did La Maestra go from being only a thought many years ago to the vast organization it is today?**

From necessity, I started working at an early age and found myself drawn to teaching and social services. In 1986, Congress passed the Immigration and Reform Act which allowed me and a group of teachers to form La Maestra Amnesty Center in 1986. We developed curriculum and taught 12,000 students in English, History, Civics, Job Training, Computer Literacy, and Youth Development, along with assisting eligible students to apply for residency and other immigration related programs. We held monthly student council meetings and it quickly became apparent that our student body was lacking access to numerous social services, with healthcare at the top of the list. I developed a strategic plan for the formation of a non-profit health clinic and presented it to the Board of Directors, which they readily approved. In 1990, La Maestra Community Health Centers was formed to bring much needed culturally competent medical services to the community. While the focus shifted to healthcare, the organization continued to develop the other existing social determinant programs. I never imagined how large the organization would become, and I really believe that it is a miracle.

**It is clear that La Maestra is having significant impact on the lives of people not only in the areas of health but in all aspects of their lives. What is your philosophy to this success?**

La Maestra's philosophy has always been to focus on wellbeing which is why we have developed the La Maestra Circle of Care® holistic model, encompassing social determinants of health in an integrated, evidenced-based delivery system. Our populations experience is layered with challenges which need to be addressed in order for them to achieve wellbeing.

**In your opinion, what are the most important challenges facing families in City Heights today and how do you see La Maestra's role in the future concerning these challenges?**

A few of the challenges families in City Heights face today would include: access to quality healthcare integrated with social services; safe and affordable housing; food scarcity; economic development; mental health; behavioral health (including substance use disorder treatment, counseling through a trauma-informed model); and youth development. The La Maestra Circle of Care® has been developed over the course of 35 years to address these areas of need. It spans across sectors of health, housing, economic development, food scarcity, immigration, legal issues, human trafficking, and many more supportive services. While each of these programs are valuable, the culmination of the programs forms a supportive system for the participants, especially during times of crisis. The recent pandemic has contributed to challenges for those in our community who were already feeling disconnected and marginalized, enhancing isolation and fear. Connectedness to a supportive system, such as La Maestra's Circle of Care®, provides the resources needed to address the negative consequences of the COVID19 pandemic. Patients and clients align with our culturally competent staff which builds trust and increases access to care, directly through La Maestra's programs as well as through the vast network La Maestra has built across many sectors of society, bringing needed resources into our community.

**What are you most proud of in your work at La Maestra and in the City Heights community?**

The ability to continuously respond to the needs of the community through innovative and creative programs, models, and initiatives, and staying focused on our mission. The organization of La Maestra is very entrepreneurial and attracts like-minded, passionate and caring Board members and staff.

The Board of Directors and staff are representative of the patients and clients served by La Maestra. Alignment of patients/clients with staff through shared cultures, values, and belief systems is extremely important. Shared backgrounds and life experiences has facilitated trusting relationships with the community and greatly enhances the continuity of care. I am very proud of the grassroots Circle of Care model we have developed and have remained true to over the last 35 years. It works and is sustainable. Aside from the comprehensive and integrated services La Maestra offers, I feel blessed that the delivery model brings much needed resources which contributes to healing and a better quality of life for our patients and clients. Currently, La Maestra has over 634 full-time employees. I am proud that the organization hires and develops future leaders from within the communities we serve.



**What has been the most rewarding? And challenging? What has surprised you the most through the years of leading La Maestra?**

I find it very rewarding to witness how La Maestra has positively impacted so many individuals and their families. When people access needed resources, they become empowered and find ways to give back to their community. Reciprocity is a very powerful agent of change in individuals' lives and has a ripple effect throughout the community.

Through my vocation at La Maestra, I am constantly amazed at how resilient human beings are and how many commonalities they share. Provided with established pathways to resources, through caring and supportive staff, individuals are able to make advancements in healing and wellbeing as well as progress in addressing life challenges. Soon, they are helping others and the cycle continues.

What has been most challenging is the slow process of governmental agencies to realize that wellbeing can only be achieved by addressing all of the social determinants of health. Health services are essential, but more is required, such as: housing, economic development, education, youth development, access to nutritious food, and social services. A payment methodology for social determinants services is required in order for our communities of need to attain a better quality of life. Thankfully, the Board at La Maestra has always understood that wellbeing is the goal and entails attention to social determinants and has funded the creation of these services, at great cost to the organization. I truly hope to see the day when local, state, and federal governmental agencies begin to pay for these social determinant services.

**What lessons have you learned in this endeavor that you'd like to pass on to others?**

A strong faith in God, patience, compassion, positive and creative energy, focus on the mission, daily advocacy for those who do not have a voice in our society, and above all the drive to relieve suffering. The ability to grow leadership and attract skilled personnel with a passion for effecting positive change is a catalyst for growth and organizational development.

**Do you mind sharing with us a bit about your life outside of La Maestra? What are your other passions, talents, and hobbies that you enjoy?**

Essential to my everyday life is growing my spiritual development. I enjoy spending my time with my family, cooking, sewing, crafting, dancing, walking, and traveling. I've served on many Boards supporting efforts dear to my heart such as education, health, community development, housing, transportation, foster care, economic

development, and advocacy. I read voraciously and have written three books to further advocate for vulnerable populations: *The Soul Speaks*, *Surviving in the Shadows*, and *Transparent People*.

**What is the advice you would give youth in City Heights? Any encouraging words for our community families and parents during this challenging time?**

I would like them to know that there are plenty of people who care about them and they are not alone in their struggles. Remain vigilant in seeking the resources they need and help others by imparting the information with others. Despite the constant and numerous challenges that life brings, there are always those willing to help. Keep the faith that conditions improve and stay socially connected for the love, support we all need. The pursuit of education is extremely important. I have found that knowledge ignites creativity and inspiration. I grew up in a large multicultural family that often struggled with poverty. I'm sensitive to the complex challenges vulnerable populations face, as my family and I have experienced many of the same struggles. Life experiences, complimented by my pursuit of education, has brought many applicable skills to the development of La Maestra.

**Mr. Price recommended you as our City Heights Hero for this issue, and it's clear you've become a hero to many of the children, youth, and families you serve in City Heights and the other locations you serve, what are your thoughts about this recognition?**

I feel very humbled by this recognition as I'm sure that there are many heroes in our community. I am very honored to be chosen especially by a long-time philanthropist in City Heights, who knows the community and has invested greatly in its development. I am also thankful to Sol Price for selecting City Heights for re-development. La Maestra has enjoyed a long relationship with Price Philanthropies and the mentoring Sol Price offered me back in the early 2000's was invaluable. Robert Price has continued this legacy and I look forward to further infrastructure expansion.



**Any other information or impacts you feel you've made during your leadership in this community that you'd like to share about?**

Looking back on my childhood, I recognize many family members who could have greatly benefited from culturally competent services. I saw no community support for medical and mental health, domestic violence situations, substance abuse, food scarcity, unemployment, and housing needs. It seemed like people had to fend for themselves. This background undoubtedly led me to devote my career to developing programs for vulnerable populations. I deeply appreciate my family and their mentorship throughout my life. I believe God led me to this life purpose and prepared me to contribute to our community.

My experience is that faith, caring, and determination are strong drivers of social change. Life experience, pursuit of higher education, and network development brings the necessary skills and resources required to affect that positive change. Nothing remains constant and change agents must be ready to take opportunities when they are presented or be part of their creation. The ability to pivot quickly, while continuously keeping a pulse on the ever-emerging needs of the community are acquired skills. I am thrilled to see future leaders emerging in City Heights and other underserved communities across the nation, effecting positive change for all people.

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