

SECOND IN A SERIES

¡Extraordinarios!

Houston Latinos who are making a difference

By Olivia P. Tallet and Sam González Kelly STAFF WRITERS

The Houston area is home to a vibrant and diverse Latino population that has made it one of the most successful and interesting regions in the country. For Hispanic Heritage Month, the Houston Chronicle is profiling 10 extraordinary individuals over four Sundays in Zest.

ONLINE: To see who else made the list of 10 extraordinary Latino leaders, visit [HoustonChronicle.com/notablelatinos](https://www.houstonchronicle.com/notablelatinos)

Entertainment

RAUL ORLANDO EDWARDS

Director of Strictly Street Salsa dance studio and FLAMART. Creator of the Afro-Latin Fest in Houston.

BIO: Raul Orlando Edwards, a Panamanian of Jamaican descent, moved to Houston in 1995 and started the city's first salsa studio, Strictly Street Salsa, three years later. Since then, he has founded FLAMART (Featuring Latin American Music and Arts), the Afro-Latin Festival of Houston and partnered with the city on the "Salsa y Salud" health initiative.

Q: What gaps were you trying to fill when you opened Houston's first Latin salsa studio?

A: One of the huge gaps that existed was the absence of representation. Obviously, because of our proximity to Mexico, almost everything here was Mexican, so I began to push programs that presented all the different aspects of Latin America, and that became like a mission for me to educate on that.

When I started teaching, I was renting a space in a ballroom, and the director asked me if she could train me to teach for them. And in that training, I saw that nothing they were teaching had anything to do with the culture. It was completely artificial, so I felt offended by the fact that they were monetizing the culture with no respect for it. Monetizing it was not the issue, but at least have some decency. So, I decided I was not going to be a complainer, and that's when I decided to launch Strictly Street Salsa. The purpose of the name was to tell the person, "We're going to teach you how Latin people actually dance." And almost 25 years later, we're still here doing the same thing.

Q: How do you use your platform to lift Latino arts in Houston?

A: When I started with salsa, a lot of people would call me a snob because they'd be doing some kind of a promo at a club, and I'd say, "I don't dance in clubs." If I'm going to rehearse for hours and spend money on a nice outfit, why should I go to a club where people are not going to pay attention? In that process, I realized that our art was being presented in the wrong places, and that was sending the message that our art wasn't good enough to be in a theater.

For example, "Salsa y Salud" is presented on the same platform where the Houston Symphony presents, where the Houston Ballet presents, where the Grand Opera presents, and all these reputable and highly esteemed groups. I thought that's one of the ways we can begin to present Latin American art forms, by saying it, too, belongs on this stage.

I realized it was important to present the genre, to take it from the clubs and put it on the stage, and by doing that, we begin to elevate the art form, not only for the sake of the art form but for the sake of the mindset. When people go to the Miller (Outdoor) Theatre and see all these names, and they see Salsa y Salud, it starts something in people's minds that says, "Oh, this is normal, this is what it should be."

Q: How can Houston continue to grow the arts within its Latino community?

A: We can celebrate the diversity within Latino culture. I was at a program for Hispanic Heritage Month once, and this lady was offended, saying, "Yo no puedo creer lo que esta haciendo este ciudad con la programa. Como se les ocurre presentar un danzón para el Hispanic Heritage Month? (I can't believe what the city is doing with this program. How can they present a danzon during Hispanic Heritage Month?)" And I was like, "You know danzon is from Cuba, right?" Even within our communities, education is needed. When



Marie D. De Jesús / Staff photographer

Panamanian-born Raul Orlando Edwards is the director of Strictly Street Salsa dance studio.

people don't respect and appreciate other cultures, that's part of the problem.

It's very important to me to ensure that everything is presented with the respect it deserves. Equalizing the platform will help, so that every single person who comes to see a show can see an art form from their country elevated and respected.

Law and community engagement

SOFÍA ADROGUÉ

Lawyer

BIO: Born in Argentina, Adrogué is editor of Texas Business Litigation. She has been showcased in lists of the 25 Most Influential Hispanic Lawyers, Most Powerful Women in Law in the U.S. and Most Powerful and Influential Women of Texas, among many other distinctions. She is an adviser to and board member of numerous community-oriented organizations, including the

Mayor's Hispanic Advisory Board.

Q: Tell us about your journey to becoming one of the most successful lawyers and community advocates in Houston.

A: I immigrated to the United States when I was 8 with my parents and my four siblings. We arrived in Boston with 14 suitcases, speaking little to no English. My father supported a family of seven initially with a small grant from the World Health Organization. We moved later to Houston. My father is a distinguished emeritus professor at Baylor College of Medicine. In pursuit of the American dream, my parents raised all five children to follow the family tradition of post-graduate careers in either medicine or law; all five of us are practicing physicians or attorneys in Houston.

I took educational opportunities with full academic scholarships at Rice University and the University of Houston Law Center. Bringing my journey full circle, I returned to Boston to

Harvard Business School in 2006 as a 40-year-old practicing lawyer and mother of three young children. Those years I invested in doing the Harvard Business School Owner/President Management Program were challenging, but it paid off. I was selected as the U.S. representative and U.S. keynote speaker for my graduating class. I was the first woman ever serving in those roles in that executive education program.

I believe you are a more effective advocate, a more effective professional and a more effective human being if you give back along the way. One of the ways I have given back is by co-hosting and co-producing the award-winning, community-oriented program "Latina Voices: Smart Talk," where I have sought to empower, educate, engage and enlighten our diverse community. I am also proud of having represented my community and worked as a member of boards of directors or executive committees for numerous organizations. For example, the American Leader-

ship Forum Houston, the UH Law Center Immigration Clinic or Houston First, among others.

Q: Is being a Latina something of value to you?

A: I am privileged and proud to be a Latina lawyer in Texas, a profession where less than 2 percent are Hispanic females in the country. Characteristics from my cultural heritage like my fluency in Spanish have added international flexibility to my cross-border and transnational disputes. My immigrant experience and pride are fundamentally woven together. I travel to my place of birth whenever possible, always cognizant of my roots and traditions. My story is a story of intense work, passion and, truly, a little luck. As an immigrant from Argentina, I have sought to return in multiples all the opportunities the United States has provided me.

As U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor has so poignantly said, "The Latina in me is an ember that blazes forever." For me, education, faith, humility, integrity and work ethic are our indelible values.

Q: What worries you and what moves you as a human being?

A: These are the most sobering of times, unprecedented, with, in essence, a social, economic and health global pandemic. I adhere to the need to resolve, reimagine, reset and recover as we seek to survive and thrive. In times of such crisis, we have to pivot, putting people first. There truly is a premium on bold, authentic, empathetic leadership as well as decisive, bold orchestrated actions. Houston and our Hispanic and Latino community do this daily.

Undoubtedly, crises are opportunities for innovation. Let us innovate for our Hispanic and Latino communities. Houston is the single most ethnically and culturally diverse city in our country. We need people from our Hispanic community being included at all tables. Let's pursue it.

Throughout my life, I have crossed cultural lines to inspire and mentor. I have sought to serve as a role model, not only as a woman but also as a mother and, of course, as a lawyer. What moves me is the relentless pursuit, seeking to empower others and pursuing a legacy of excellence and public service as the labyrinth of life continues. I believe in the Jaycees motto that "service to humanity is the best work of life." My goal has been to "walk the talk," from my commitment to the highest standards of the legal profession through hard work, to connecting with all people for the greater good of our diverse community.

Q: What is justice for you? Have you considered becoming a judge?

A: I believe that all should enter the courthouse with full faith and trust that our judiciary will treat all with fairness and respect. All stakeholders – counsel, jurors, witnesses and the parties – are deserving of jurists that know the community and the law and that will engender full faith in our judicial system. "Without justice being freely, fully and impartially administered, neither our persons, nor our rights, nor our property, can be protected," said U.S. Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story, who served from 1812-45.

Being a lawyer has been most fulfilling. Serving as a member of the judiciary would truly be reaching the summit of my professional goals. After taking the oath of citizenship from a federal judge 32 years ago, and the oath as an officer of the court as a member of the Texas bar 29 years ago, having the opportunity to serve through the formidable privilege and commensurate responsibility of the role of a judge would be the culmination of my American dream.



Brett Coomer / Staff photographer

Diamond McCarthy partner Sofia Adrogué is recognized as an influential Latina in the legal field.

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