

SBA names de la Torre small business person of the year



Martha C. de la Torre, president and CEO of El Clasificado, has been named "Small Business Person of the Year" in the Los Angeles District of the United States Small Business

Administration. The announcement was made at an awards ceremony on May 16 at the Hyatt Regency in downtown Los Angeles.

De la Torre founded El Clasificado in 1988. With a circulation of 130,000, the publication has become one of the nation's largest free Spanish weekly publications. Martha has already been recognized as a business leader by notable organizations such as Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year, the National Association of Women Business Owners Hall of Fame, the United States Hispanic Chamber of Commerce and, locally, by the Latin Business Association.

"This award couldn't come at a better time since El Clasificado celebrated its 15th anniversary this May," said de la Torre. "I am delighted to share this award with all my employees."

El Clasificado is a free weekly publication that blends classified advertising with consumer-friendly editorial. Its distribution includes Los Angeles and Orange counties, and its V.A.C.-audited readership is 450,000 with a circulation of 130,000.

De la Torre earned her Bachelor of Science degree in Accounting from Loyola Marymount University in 1978, and went to work as an account manager for Arthur Young & Co., a predecessor firm of Ernst & Young. While so employed she became a Certified Public Accountant.

In 1986, de la Torre was hired as the chief financial officer for La Opinion, a daily Spanish-language newspaper in Los Angeles. There she quickly learned the rudiments of publishing specifically for the Spanish-language market. She also realized that there was a need for a free paper that focused on Spanish-language classifieds; so after two years at La Opinion, de la Torre launched El Clasificado.

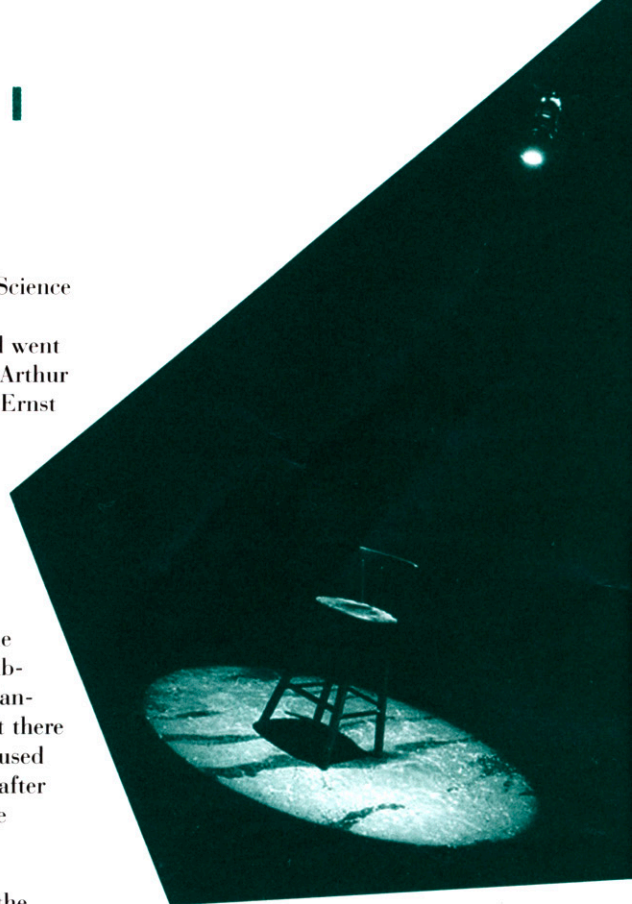
The early years were hard ones for the fledgling newspaper. An unexpected recession challenged de la Torre's commitment to her project, and she was forced to sell her home and car and move in with her parents to keep her business going. She even had to work part time as a CPA to make ends meet; but the dream never died.

The recession caused de la Torre to take a hard look at her business and chart a new course. She realized that by changing her distribution plan, she might change the course of her business.

Recession conditions had improved by 1992, and de la Torre had changed her distribution from home delivery to racks in strategic stores (including Kmart, Albertson's, 7-Eleven and Blockbuster) because research had shown her that Latinos like to go to the supermarket every day. She was right, and the rewards of her research included rapid growth.

For years she had gone it alone with just her family's assistance; but in 1993, she was finally ready to hire part-time help. Inspired by the movie "Stand and Deliver" (about a teacher who inspired Latino students to excel), de la Torre recruited computer-literate students from the same school: Garfield High. Many of those students still work for her today.

The growth that began in the early 1990s



continues today. In 2001 she purchased a 95% interest in Al Borde ("On the Edge"), a Spanish tabloid alternative entertainment newspaper aimed at unmarried, childless people in their teens and 20s.

Then in November of 2002, de la Torre launched another new venture: Auto Plaza, a four-color used-car supplement inserted into El Clasificado. She plans to expand Auto Plaza from its current 30,000 circulation in 2003, as well as launch a Real Estate and Apartment Guide targeting the Hispanic community.

De la Torre has served on the board of various nonprofit organizations including the Los Angeles Child Guidance Clinic, Loyola Marymount University's Mexican American Alumni Association, L.A. Family Housing and Los Angeles County Education Foundation. She is active in the business community and is a member of several community Chambers of Commerce as well as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the East Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce and the Latin Business Association.

- Barbara A. Holmes