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From Fire to Fortune

Veronica Muzquiz Edwards believes in paying it forward

By Brady Rhoades

When InGenesis founder and CEO Dr. Veronica Muzquiz Edwards is asked about her success, the first thing that comes to her mind isn't wealth, or power, or awards.

It's her mother, and the lessons she learned from her.

When Dr. Edwards, a first-generation American, received her doctoral degree—on the very same day that her daughter Sydney received her undergraduate degree—her mother, an immigrant from Mexico, let her in on a secret: She never had the opportunity to claim a high school diploma.

That was a reminder of how much her parents had sacrificed.

When Edwards received her master's degree, her parents handed her a copy of her report card from first grade. The teacher recommended she be held back.

That was a reminder of the importance of perseverance.

Her ability to overcome challenges and hardships was also put to the test when, in the 1990s, Edwards was given a "pink slip" after years as a regional director of sales and marketing at a Fortune 50 company.

"I became inspired to try my entrepreneurial hat," she said. "It was survival mode."

Her will to survive was tested more intensely years after Edwards founded InGenesis, a premier supplier of global healthcare workforce solutions based in San Antonio, Texas.

On New Year's Eve, 2015, InGenesis' headquarters was ravaged by a four-alarm fire.

Edwards' \$100-plus million business was tested. Her future, and the future of her 3,000 employees, may have seemed bleak.

But her vision—metaphorically speaking—was 20/20.

"During our disaster recovery period, we weren't out to duplicate what was being done, we were out to build something that's never been done," she said. "Earlier in the year I had made a plan for what the company was going to be by the year 2020, and the fire accelerated that plan."

What followed was a Herculean comeback

effort tailor-made for Hollywood, involving "a priceless series of decisive moments that propelled our path to recovery," Edwards said.

Smoke damaged computers, the telephone system, printers, paper files and supplies. But InGenesis' cloud-based IT platform, which housed all customer service, payroll, and recruiting information, was intact—employees could access it via cell phones and laptops, and the company maintained business continuity.

Within 72 hours of the blaze, InGenesis personnel were working on event tables in a local hotel ballroom. Executives worked in unoccupied corners of the hotel lobby.

On Day 4, hotel management informed Edwards that her company could use the ballroom only on weekends, so she blasted out an email to business leaders asking them to help the "number-one fastest growing company in America."

Before you knew it, InGenesis was doing business on the campus of the University of the Incarnate Word, a local faith-based university where Edwards was earning her Doctorate of Business Administration, specializing in—can you say "serendipity"?—*crisis leadership, workforce preparedness and disaster planning for chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear events.*

Edwards worked on a 24-inch round table and a broken chair saved from the dumpster; employees worked on foldout picnic tables positioned around power pillars.

By Day 5, Edwards had signed the company's first post-disaster purchase order on a ragged piece of cardboard pulled from the same dumpster.

Fast forward three years. InGenesis, a name that combines "ingenuity" and "genesis," maintained a solid grip as one of the largest workforce solutions companies in North America and the largest diversity healthcare staffing firm in the country. It has staff of more than 3,500 in programs located at more than 350 client locations around the U.S., supported by 52 satellite locations.

Time to celebrate? Not for too long.

Edwards was determined not only to return InGenesis to excellence but to *get better*.

Through surpassing grit and an incalculable amount of sweat, InGenesis rebuilt itself into a more resilient post-disaster state, and business has grown by 96 percent since the catastrophe.

So how did they do it?

Edwards, who's been named National Hispanic Businesswoman of the Year, one of the top 50 most influential Hispanic business leaders in America and one of the country's top 10 female entrepreneurs, credits a diverse leadership team.

About 80 percent of InGenesis' staff is women and minorities. The company is the largest woman- or minority-owned health-care staffing firm in the U.S. The diversity extends to skill-sets: the company hires Fortune 500 managers, engineers, mathematicians, experts in the medical field, in technology, in language arts, you name it.

Edwards said their leadership's "wide array of backgrounds amplifies their entrepreneurial ideas."

At Edwards' core is a commitment to pay it forward, just like her parents did.

"We've developed an amazing corporate social responsibility program," she said. "It's all about our commitment to safeguarding the safety and well-being of employees and communities... I think we're here to drive to be the difference."

Converse with this global superstar long enough, and she returns to home, where her philosophy manifests most personally.

Just as her mother taught her, she teaches her two children. Just as she was the pride of her mother, her children are her pride.

"It's about impacting the next generation, contributing to education and helping other people excel."

When her daughter Sydney turned 16, the family held a Mexican-style Sweet 16 fiesta. Before the party, Sydney asked family and guests not to buy her any presents; instead, she'd bring a basket and they could deposit donations—checks—to the Ameri-



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can Diabetes Association (ADA) in honor of Edwards’ brother, who had recently passed away. Sydney, now studying for a Masters in Emergency Management at California State University Long Beach, continues to raise money for the ADA.

So does InGenesis. This year, the company is also giving donations to disaster relief efforts in Texas cities and counties devastated by Hurricane Harvey.

“It’s super rare to hear a privately held company tell their disaster recovery story,”

Edwards said.

But it can be done.

InGenesis, approaching its 20-year anniversary, moved from fire to fortune. Others can move from storm to success.