

## **NEW WOMEN OF THE NEW SOUTH;**

### **KEEN ON THE COMMUNITY;**

#### **Latino leader a strong voice in campaign to promote jobs for new immigrants and defeat old stereotypes**

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**Series:** This is the third profile in a summer series on **New Women** of the **New South**. Today's installment features **Latino leader** Maritza **Keen**.

## **Body**

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Her parents, Javier and Esther Soto, immigrated to **New** York from Puerto Rico in the 1950s. Her father worked two **jobs**, and the three children would be asleep when he got home, but he left candy bars in their rooms so they'd know he'd been there.

The father's sacrifice for a better life in America was never lost on his only daughter, Maritza **Keen**.

"My family is the basis for everything in my life," **Keen** said. "My parents were instrumental in my success. They encouraged me and my two brothers to work hard and get an education."

As director of the Latin American Association, **Keen**, 40, has put all of her energy into making life better for the estimated 200,000 Latinos in the Atlanta area.

As a bridge between two worlds that sometimes clash, **Keen** works to increase cultural awareness and understanding while helping Latinos with everything from free English classes to **job** placement and immigration aid.

Her work takes her from corporate offices to city hall chambers to churches - **promoting** and defending the **Latino community**'s political, economic and social concerns.

When she thinks of hard-working **immigrants** like her parents, it's sometimes hard to hold back the anger she feels when all Latinos are painted with the same broad brush.

"The **stereotype** is that Latinos do not have a right to be here, or they're just here to take **jobs**," **Keen** said. "The reality is that most Latinos who come here are looking for a better way of life, and they're willing to work."

In 1992 when a Chamblee city councilman suggested that the city install bear traps to catch Mexican day laborers, **Keen** confronted city officials. The city councilman apologized. And after more meetings, the city vowed to hire more Latinos and other minorities, a promise it has kept.

**Keen**'s actions during the controversy didn't surprise her husband, Stephen **Keen**.

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"If she thinks you're wrong, she's going to tell you right upfront at the drop of the hat," said the 42-year-old computer programmer.

Her diplomacy has earned her the respect of such local leaders as Chamblee Mayor Johnson "Dub" Brown. These days he routinely goes to Keen for advice when dealing with Chamblee's growing Latino population.

"She's our go-between," Brown said. "If we have any problem in any way, we get her input. Her advice never steers us wrong."

Keen moved to Atlanta from Pensacola, Fla., in 1980. She went to the Latin American Association for help in finding a job and landed a position running a clinical program for drug-addicted youths. When the director's job became vacant four years later, the association called Keen.

She immediately began working to transform the nonprofit association, expanding programs and attending community meetings, fund-raisers and weekend leadership seminars.

The office was in the basement of a building in Lindbergh Plaza in Buckhead. It had a staff of eight and a \$ 200,000 annual budget. Today, the association owns a 16,000-square-foot building on Buford Highway, has 28 staff members and an annual budget of \$ 1.1 million.

"She sacrificed her own personal time," said Stratton Frank, a co-founder of the association. "You could never pay her for the amount of time she spent on evenings and weekends on behalf of the association."

Board members have even suggested that Keen slow down. And she has to spend more time with her family. She's expecting her second child in November and has a 2-year-old son named after her father, who has retired, moved from New York and built a home next door to his daughter's in Loganville.

"I couldn't see raising my son not near my parents," Keen said.

-This is the third profile in a summer series on New Women of the New South.

## Graphic

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Chart: THE KEEN file

> Age: 40

> Education: 1978 bachelor's degree in psychology and Spanish literature

from Queens College, City University of New York; master's degree in clinical psychology from the University of West Florida.

> Personal: Lives in Loganville with her husband, Stephen, and 2-year-

old son, Javier. Spends spare time reading. Favorite author is Atlanta's Anne Rivers Siddons.

> Philosophy: "I've always been an optimistic person. I always think things are going to work out. You've got to think positive. And you've got to have a vision."

--John Blake

Photo: "Most Latinos who come here are looking for a better way of life,

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and they're willing to work," says Maritza Keen, director of Atlanta's Latin American Association. / SCOTT MARTIN / Special

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