

Media Executive Puts Her Experience to Work Para Los Niños

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Gisselle Acevedo congratulates a young girl on her art project at Para Los Niños.

On the day [Gisselle Acevedo](#) quit her job as a newspaper executive, she pinned a note on her desk listing her requirements for her next job: "Change the world. Work on Skid Row. Work with children."

When she learned she had been hired as president and CEO of [Para Los Niños](#) (For the Children), a Los Angeles nonprofit serving low-income student, she fell to her knees in gratitude. "Their mission to serve the neediest children of Los Angeles exactly matched my own," she says.

A lawyer-turned-executive, Acevedo had grown dissatisfied with work in the corporate world. Now, after three years with Para Los Niños, she says, "Even when I put in 16-hour days, I don't think of it as work."

Para Los Niños serves more than 4,600 low-income children and youths at 28 sites in Los Angeles with education, social and mental health programs, including preschool centers, after-school care, a charter school, youth workforce services, and family counseling and support.

Acevedo knows the deprivation needy children face because she started her life as one of them. Trapped alone inside her apartment to avoid the predators and gangs roaming the streets, she escaped into the safety of books and discovered that for a poor immigrant girl of color, education could lead to freedom.

With a voracious appetite for learning, Acevedo excelled in school, completed college and became a schoolteacher in Los Angeles. At night, she earned her master's degree in education, then went on to law school. As a lawyer, she advocated for the educational rights of students with severe developmental disabilities.

By then almost 40 years old, with a new daughter to care for, Acevedo took a job in public relations at a health management company. She planned to stay for one year, but one job led to the next, and for 10 years she served in executive roles at major corporations, including AT&T Broadband and the *Los Angeles Times*.

As president and general manager of the Spanish language newspaper *Hoy*, she hoped to give her community a voice. But instead, the job focused on capital and margins. Approaching age 50, Acevedo knew it was time to get out of the corporate world. "I was dying inside," she says.

She quit without a specific plan. When Acevedo heard that Para Los Niños was looking for a chief executive, she applied immediately. When she was selected, "My teenage daughter was screaming for joy because she knew my fears about not finding a meaningful job," she says.

Her age, then 50, was not a liability, she says. "Maturity is a valuable asset for nonprofit leadership. With more life experience, we offer more foresight and a 360-degree perspective," she says. She has brought many of the skills she learned during 10 years of managing teams and budgets and communicating with the public. "It was as if I had been preparing to work here my whole life."

The rewards of her work are tangible. "When kids finish our preschool program, we give a little graduation ceremony. We ask each parent to stand up and promise that this will be the first of many graduations. The look of pride and determination on their faces makes it all worthwhile," she says.

Para Los Niños has been hard hit by the economic downturn. "The reduced funding has forced us to cut services," says Acevedo. "I've been on the boards of foundations that give money. Now I ask for it. It's very humbling asking for money."

As CEO of Para Los Niños, she is a passionate advocate for children. In a voice filled with urgency she says, "These kids are at such great risk, living in circumstances most of us can't even imagine – sometimes 10 people living in a couple of rooms. And they don't have enough adults to lead them safely into the world.

"Nothing defeats poverty like education. That's the reason I fight so hard to maintain our preschool programs, charter schools and after-school programs."

Jerry Waxler, M.S., blogs about life story writing on the [Memory Writers Network](#).