

## Young engineers build new profile in the field

Rick Rivera, left, of R&G Engineering LLC started out with few peers and even fewer contacts in the industry.

Photo: Stephen J. Serio

From this week's Focus Young engineers build new profile in the field

By: Kevin Davis August 03, 2009

Rick Rivera grew up in the Humboldt Park neighborhood of Chicago when it was a much rougher place, and where few of his peers showed much interest in going to school.

"Where we grew up, no one went to college," he says. "They were either in jail or in gangs or doing lots of negative things."

Mr. Rivera's father came from Mexico and his mother from Guatemala. His father worked warehouse jobs and saved to buy two- and three-flat buildings, which he and the family rehabbed and rented. His mother raised the children and helped out with the real estate business.

"That's how they were able to send me to school," says Mr. Rivera, 34, the first in his extended family to earn a college degree.

Having worked with his parents to rehab homes, Mr. Rivera became skilled in construction and building, which led to his interest in civil engineering. An older cousin who was an electrical engineer encouraged him to go to college.

He's among a growing number of Hispanics joining the ranks of civil engineers. The percentage of Hispanics in the profession hit 9.2% in 2008, up from 5.3% in 2003, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

### ON HIS OWN

After graduating from college, Mr. Rivera worked for several consultancies. "I always had the idea I could own my own company," he says. "I always felt I had it in me. It's an entrepreneurship thing that a lot of Hispanics have, whether it's a mom-and-pop candy shop or a small business. I hate to stereotype, but from my experience and group of friends, it's true. I have friends with electronics businesses, clothing stores."

He joined Dan Griffin to form Chicago-based R&G Engineering LLC, where Mr. Rivera is president. The company has 10 employees, plans to hire more this year and expects 2009 revenue to top \$1.5 million.

As a Hispanic engineer, Mr. Rivera found early on that he had few peers and even fewer contacts in the industry. With the help of the entrepreneurship program at the Illinois Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, Mr. Rivera was able to make those contacts. "We're dealing with a lot of competition and a lot of existing relationships," he says.

The chamber and entrepreneurship center also helped Mr. Rivera navigate the process of becoming a certified minority contractor; that has opened new doors to government business, which provides the lion's share of the firm's revenue.

He recently was awarded a \$5,000 matching grant from the center to build an internal computer server and system for the business, and through chamber events, he has been introduced to officials from the Illinois Department of Transportation in Springfield.

Networking, mentoring and recruiting &mdash; or lack thereof &mdash; are the main hurdles Hispanics face, according to Tatiana Hernandez.

A water resources engineer in the Chicago office of TetraTech Inc., a California-based engineering consultancy, Ms. Hernandez, 33, says she had never even heard of civil engineering when she was growing up in Colombia.

"Engineers don't promote their careers like doctors and accountants," she says. "Civil engineers are by nature introverted."

Finding mentors can be difficult.

In general, most Hispanics "don't have friends or family members who are engineers to talk about it," she says, "and very few actually have the opportunity to meet engineers."

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