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Alumna Profile: Pride of Heritage

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Pride of Heritage



LAS alumna Michelle Morales (Latin American Studies '97) is president of the Woods Fund.

DePaul opened up a whole new world for Michelle Morales (Latin American Studies '97). "As a first-generation college student and graduate, it was a scary and transformational experience all at once. It was the first time I was in similar spaces with kids from very different socioeconomic backgrounds. It was a profound opportunity and learning period for me as to how I fit into society," says Morales.

Morales' parents are from Puerto Rico, and because her father was in the military, Morales spent her youth on army bases, mainly in Germany and Indianapolis.

DePaul appealed to her because it was in a big city, but she also was looking for something else. "A major criterion for me was that there was a Puerto Rican community," Morales says.

In her sophomore year, Morales discovered the Department of Latin American Studies. "I just fell in love with it," she says. "It was one inflection point in my development as a person and a leader. It helped me to establish my identity and really understand who I am as a Puerto Rican woman and how I fit into the whole Latinx reality and experience in the United States."

After graduating, Morales taught at an alternative high school in Humboldt Park that focuses on Puerto Rican history and culture. "I learned so much more about my own identity and culture, while also using much of what I learned in Latin American Studies," she says.

She soon became an administrator for a network of alternative schools in Chicago. From there, she joined Mikva Challenge, the Chicago-headquartered youth civics empowerment program, and led its Chicago chapter.

In 2019, Morales became the third Latina woman to be named president of the Woods Fund, a midsize foundation that supports community organizing and public policy advocacy. One of its primary commitments is racial equity.

"This moment in time presents a really profound opportunity for so many of us in different sectors," says Morales. "We must open ourselves up to reimagining what an equitable society could look like and to figuring out the policies and practices that need to be put in place in Chicago to make sure every single one of its residents is set up for success."

Looking ahead, she sees herself becoming president of an even larger foundation. In the meantime, Morales is content with where she is now. "I turned 45 this summer. I have been going full steam ahead for so long, and now I'm trying to pay attention to what is really important to me, such as my family," says Morales, who lives in Chicago with her husband and teenage son.

One thing is certain: DePaul has deeply influenced her. "My Latin American Studies major really defined the rest of my life. I honestly don't know where I would be today, academically or professionally, without it," she says.