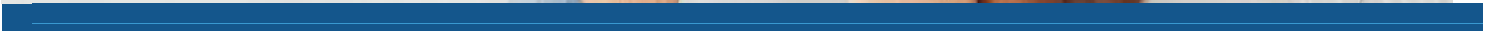




The Colorado Health Foundation™



Rising Together: Leaders Elevating Leaders in Eagle County

In Eagle County, Colorado, two remarkable women, Faviola Aldrete and Melina Valsecia, have emerged as champions of leadership. While their stories are unique, they converge on a shared mission: advocating for health equity and fostering inclusive civic engagement and economic opportunity, particularly within the LatinX community.

Faviola's journey began over a decade ago as a customer service representative at a local hospital. Witnessing firsthand the discrimination and neglect faced by Hispanic/Latinx individuals seeking medical care, she was driven to take action. Her pursuit of a career in nursing opened her eyes to the broader social determinants of health and the urgent need for community-wide, systemic transformation. "Fighting for justice isn't just about raising your voice; it's about empowering others to raise theirs," Faviola asserts. This philosophy led her to create *Campeones del Sistema*, a grassroots initiative aimed at equipping Latinx community members with the knowledge and skills needed to advocate for themselves and their families.

The curriculum for *Campeones del Sistema* was developed by a team of experts. Lisa Kunkel, a licensed therapist, helped Faviola develop phases one and two. They hired Professor Fernando Burga from the University of Minnesota, a doctor in urban development with extensive work at the Ethnography Institute at Berkeley, California, to develop phases three, four and five. Business Owner Simone Lybarger; Gladys Salinas, a *Campeona* graduate; Nancy Beltran, a *Campeona* graduate; and Jeff Corn of Eagle County Data Equity Strategist, also support the program.

Campeones del Sistema operates through a comprehensive model that starts with personal development, where participants explore their strengths, values and personal goals, developing a deeper understanding of their potential as leaders. The journey continues with community building, where participants forge connections and learn the importance of solidarity and collective action through group activities and collaborative projects. Next, they delve into systems analysis, examining systemic issues such as racism, economic inequality and environmental injustice, gaining insights into the root causes of health disparities. Armed with this knowledge, participants then learn policy advocacy, developing plans and engaging with policymakers to drive change at local and state levels. The program ensures that the journey does not end with graduation; participants continue their development through ongoing learning opportunities and community engagement, serving as mentors for future cohorts.

Similarly, Melina Valsecia's story is one of harnessing her perseverance and dedication to ensure seats for LatinX emerging leaders at tables where decisions are made. An immigrant from Argentina, Melina faced significant barriers in validating her baccalaureate qualifications in the U.S. Undeterred, she pursued additional education, obtaining a Master of Public Health degree and certification as a health educator, all while juggling multiple jobs. Now, as the Executive Director of the Eagle Valley Community Foundation (EVCF), Melina has been a transformative force. Her innovative approach to community development is exemplified by programs like Elevar, which supports people of color in Eagle County, particularly business owners facing barriers to success. Elevar equips cohort participants with the skills and resources needed to thrive through intensive training, mentorship and financial awards. Elevar is also led by Virginia Lecea of EVCF and supported by Maria Julieta Cavallo, a teacher who leads the steering committee, the meetings and the agenda. Erin Janklow coordinates the entrepreneurial elements of the program, including the partnership with Rocky Mountain MicroFinance Institute.

Despite facing resistance and skepticism, Melina's vision continues to extend beyond fostering individual success to catalyzing systemic change. "We believe that by equipping our community members with the tools they need to succeed, we can create lasting change and ensure everyone has a seat at the table," Melina states.

Both Faviola and Melina are addressing critical disparities in Eagle County, a region where the LatinX population faces significant challenges. According to statistics provided by Melina, nearly 30% of Eagle County's population and 51% of the public school population are Hispanic, yet this community disproportionately experiences barriers to healthcare, education and economic opportunities. For instance, language barriers and lack of representation in healthcare settings contribute to inadequate medical care, a challenge Faviola directly addresses through *Campeones del Sistema*. By equipping individuals with advocacy skills and knowledge, Faviola helps bridge the healthcare access and quality gap. Similarly, economic inequities exist, with many LatinX business owners facing obstacles such as limited access to capital and mentorship. Melina's *Elevar* program tackles these issues head-on by providing comprehensive support to entrepreneurs of color, helping them overcome systemic barriers and succeed in their ventures.

Alice Pugh of Civic Canopy has been instrumental in supporting both programs through the Locally Focused Work initiative of The Colorado Health Foundation. Eagle County is one of nine communities in this initiative which aims to address local health disparities by resourcing community leaders and supporting grassroots efforts. She shares, "Civic Canopy's has been honored to provide thought partnership to help amplify the impact of programs like *Campeones del Sistema* and *Elevar*. Both programs play a significant role in elevating the voices of leaders o who have been marginalized in Eagle County for too long."?

“For Elevar, Civic Canopy played a key role in planning the vision, mission, and values for the Steering Committee, which is the glue of our organization,” says Melena. “The committee works passionately to address the navigation of different challenging environments.”

Faviola’s and Melina’s efforts, while focusing on different aspects of community engagement and leadership development, complement each other in meaningful ways. Faviola's grassroots advocacy through Campeones del Sistema helps individuals address health disparities from the ground up, fostering a culture of health equity and community activism. On the other hand, Melina's systemic approach through Elevar enhances economic opportunities and representation, ensuring that underrepresented entrepreneurs have the resources and support needed to thrive. Both women understand that true empowerment requires addressing both immediate needs and systemic barriers.

Their initiatives also share common threads of community-driven change. Both Faviola and Melina emphasize the importance of education, mentorship and ongoing support, recognizing that sustainable change comes from within the community itself. Their collaborative efforts underscore the power of collective action. By lifting each other up, they are transforming Eagle County and setting a powerful example of how inclusive leadership can drive meaningful and lasting change.

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