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# Dorothy Santana has spent a decade connecting Latina moms on Long Island

Dorothy Santana, the founder of Latina Moms Connect, holds a selection of Latin American flags in Valley Stream, Jan. 30. Credit: Linda Rosier

By Beth Whitehouse

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**A**nthony Irvolino is a teenage boy – but he is a Latina Moms Connect success story.

The mothers' group was born a decade ago to help parents navigate raising bicultural Latino children on Long Island, to keep their Latin American language, music and traditions alive for the next generation.

Anthony, 16, whose mother is Dominican-American, joined his Patchogue-Medford High School Hispanic Heritage club “100 percent” due to his earlier exposure to Latina Moms Connect activities and it “would never have happened” without it, says his mother, Latina Moms member Elisa Irvolino.

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Anthony agrees. “I think it really opened up a part of me I’d never seen before,” he says. His high school club last year performed merengue and bachata dances in front of the high school and elementary school, he says.



Dorothy Santana, the founder of Latina Moms Connect, is interviewed for a tribute video to be shown at the group's gala on Feb. 29. Credit: Linda Rosier

On Feb. 29, members of Latina Moms Connect will put on fancy clothes and head to a gala to celebrate the group's 10-year anniversary. Latina Moms Connect founder and president Dorothy Santana's goal for the next decade: Become a nationwide organization.

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Latina Moms Connect has worked with other Long Island grassroots cultural organizations to launch family events including its annual Three Kings Day Celebration and Parranda Navideña with a Twist Christmas caroling that both began in 2015, and

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Noche de Velitas, a Colombian night of candles holiday tradition they launched last year. “When children see this, they feel a sense of pride. As they get older, they want to connect to their roots,” says Santana, 54, a

Colombian American social worker who has four children and lives in North Babylon.



Latina Moms of Long Island's first Sofrito Sunday was held in Babylon in 2014. Credit: The Latina Moms/Dorothy Santana

Latina Moms Connect also runs more intimate group events. Those include their Sofrito Sundays, where parents and children gather to discuss identity and to make the traditional sofrito cooking base together to bring home; Temas y Tapas, which means Topics and Appetizers, where adults, both male and female, address themes of taboo subjects including machismo, finances and mental health; and Charlas Entre Chicas, translating to discussions among women, which can cover topics including reproduction and sexuality.

Ask Santana what she's most proud of and she starts to cry. "Becoming an organization. That was a dream in itself," she says, wiping tears with a tissue from underneath her oversize black-rimmed glasses.

## RESHAPING THE NARRATIVE

Santana, who grew up in Brentwood, had left Long Island for her college and young adult years. But when she married and started a family, she moved back to Long Island in 2005.

As her family grew, she says she felt there was a lack of opportunity to expose her children to cultural activities. "In suburban living, sports are such a big thing," she says. "Lots of moms, including myself, were consumed with taking our kids to their activities. There seemed to be less time to get together with your families. If you transplanted from the city, your parents or grandparents stayed in the city."

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She would occasionally meet other mothers who worried that their children didn't want to speak Spanish and were embarrassed when their parents did. Santana felt her culture was being diluted, and wanted to connect with other Latina women to talk about how they might reshape the narrative.

She searched for Facebook groups of Latina mothers raising bicultural kids. "I was first looking to join someone else's space. I found nothing," she says. So, in February of 2014, she started what she called Latina Moms of Long Island. "I invited a few friends. They invited a few friends," she says. At first, she just posted quotes and inspirational messages about identity.

The first in-person gathering she dubbed Cafecito — coffee time — and held it at a play place in Ronkonkoma. Mothers brought their children. "It wasn't big. Three people plus me," Santana says. "I thought it was good because while we were engaging in conversation, their reaction, I knew there was something important we were doing." Santana then created what has become the group's signature event — Sofrito Sundays. She wanted women to find "soulful connections."



Mariana Pineda and her son, Max, prepare sofrito during a gathering of Latina moms of bicultural children in Valley Stream. Credit: Alessia Surdich

Sofrito Sundays is where Elisa Irvolino found the group five years ago. “I thought that the thought provoking questions that Dorothy asked were really good and helped me not only connect with other women but with myself. I was in love with the group from there,” she says.

One such question was, “What are you doing to keep culture alive in your home?” Irvolino says. Irvolino’s husband is Italian — some of the mothers in the group have the added challenge of raising children with a partner who doesn’t share their background. Irvolino started cooking Dominican dinner regularly on Saturdays — stewed

chicken, rice, sweet plantains — and playing Dominican music. “I started exposing them to it and they became more open minded about it, wanting to discover more,” she says.

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She says Latinos can feel isolated without their extended families, their countries of origin, or enough Latinos in their social circles. “Even though you do have a lot of Hispanics in your neighborhood, where are you seeing them? Maybe a few minutes in the supermarket. This allows everyone to get together and really speak to each other,” says Irvolino, who works in window treatment sales.

## **PRAISE FOR EFFORTS**

In addition to events, the group has volunteered in the community. Early in the pandemic, for instance, they volunteered as interpreters at Covid-19 testing sites, and later worked to promote vaccine awareness.

Latina Moms Connect drew praise from other members of the Latino community.



**“These women have been fighters in the community for such a long time, to try and show our kids, our children, their heritage, to let them not forget where we come from.”**

- Suffolk County Legislator Sam Gonzalez, of Brentwood, who is Puerto Rican, has a newborn granddaughter and says he plans to attend the Feb. 29 gala.

Sergio Argueta, a social worker from Long Beach, founded STRONG (Struggling to Reunite Our New Generation), a gang-prevention group, and says reaching the next generation is critical. He calls himself a “fan and ally” of Latina Moms Connect and facilitated the Tamas y Tapas session on machismo. “She’s amplifying the voice of the Latino community,” Argueta says of Santana.

Three years ago, Santana changed the name of the group from Latina Moms of Long Island to Latina Moms Connect and incorporated as an official not for profit organization. She now has a formal structure, a 10-person board of directors and the qualifications to apply for grants and other funding. Santana does not get paid.

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The gala has an immersive Carnival theme – a festive cultural celebration popular in many countries. There'll be costumed Brazilian dancers, Dominican and Colombian performers and other entertainment. The gala will mark the end of one era and the beginning of another one. "My vision," Santana says, "is to become a national organization and have this kind of group across the country."

## Latina Moms Connect 10th anniversary "Carnaval en Familia" gala

**WHEN | WHERE** 6:30 to 10:30 p.m. Feb. 29 at Flowerfield, 199 Mills Pond Rd., St. James

**COST** \$175 per person

**MORE INFO** 631-575-7505, [latinamomsconnect.org](https://www.latinamomsconnect.org)



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Beth Whitehouse writes about families, parenting and great things to do with the kids on Long Island. She's been a Newsday editor and shared a 1997 Newsday staff Pulitzer Prize for coverage of the crash of TWA Flight 800.