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Latino Focus

Modeling agency recruits local talent to fill a void

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Juanita Zapata and her mother, Natalia Rivera, pose during a photo shoot at Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden.

MARK GORMUS/TIMES-DISPATCH

Ben Alonso met Natalia Rivera and her 7-year-old daughter on a sunny afternoon earlier this month at the Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden.

Five minutes later, the strangers were sitting on the green grass in an open field, laughing, cuddling, reading and having a picnic as a happy family.

The three natives of Colombia were part of a group of Latino models posing for photographer John Henley, who was shooting thousands of frames, freezing the happy expressions, family walks, group interactions and single portraits.

The photo shoot in Henrico County was the first of at least three planned by Modelogic Wilhelmina, a modeling agency in Richmond.

The 30 models were selected from an initial Latino casting recently for a follow-up photo shoot to create a division of local Hispanic talent to meet the increasing demand from businesses and advertising and production companies, said President Stacie Vanchieri.

Modelogic Wilhelmina focuses on commercial modeling.

The agency's clients range from Jeep and Chrysler to TV and movie productions to retailers such as Kmart, Circuit City and S&K Menswear.

Vanchieri said she will upload the photo images on a new Hispanic models Web site for clients and potential clients to see.

"We just have noticed this trend that our clients are requiring more and more Hispanic talent every year," she said. "No local agency is focusing on Latino talent, so I thought it might be a good idea to open a division of Hispanic/Latino models to the market."

For Jackie Bird, chair-elect of the board of directors of the McLean-based Association of Hispanic Advertising Agencies, the increased demand for Latino models reflects the growing advertising market nationwide to that community.

That means reaching more than 42 million potential Hispanic customers, the largest and fastest-growing minority in the country with a buying power expected to hit nearly \$900 billion this year.

Wanting a piece of the big pie, businesses are making sure they are visible in that market. The Hispanic advertising industry is outpacing all other sectors of advertising, said Bird, who is the president and chief executive officer of the marketing company Winglatino.

"In the last four years, the Hispanic advertising industry has tripled from 1.1 billion to 4 billion," she said from her office in New York. "If you are targeting the Latino market, you want to represent the Latino community in the advertising."

For 14 years, Modelogic Wilhelmina has been doing work in print, TV, broadcasting and industry training videos. About two years ago, Vanchieri said, she began noticing businesses demanding more Hispanic models.

Until now, when asked for Latino or Asian models, she had to bring in talent from places such as New York or the West Coast, she said.

"I don't necessarily want to do that anymore. I want to use local talent," she said.

Realizing that the population in Richmond has become more diverse over the years, the agency did a couple of casting calls for Hispanic and Asian models at the office, but no one showed up.

For the last Latino casting earlier this month, the agency and photographer Ariel Skelley, from Ariel Skelley Photography, worked with Leo Caldas, a self-employed graphic designer from the Dominican Republic, to get the word out.

Caldas, who lives in Richmond, spread the word through e-mail, friends and organizations and suggested that the casting be held in the community because it would be harder to bring potential models to the agency's office in Church Hill.

To Vanchieri's surprise, scores of families and some grandparents from a host of Latin American countries and with many levels of acculturation in the U.S came to Bodega Latina at 6003 W. Broad St. Modelogic will be recruiting more models at the Virginia Hispanic Chamber of Commerce's Feria de Oportunidad (Opportunity Fair) July 21 at Cloverleaf Mall.

"To have 80 to 90 people in a casting is wonderful," Vanchieri said.

She said she was looking for regular, next-door kind of people.

"We are looking for people with good skin, good teeth . . . a friendly smile and a friendly face," she said. "We are not looking for high cheekbones, size 2 and super tall. It's not Vogue magazine modeling, it's commercial modeling."

Vanchieri said her agency is preferably looking for baby-boomer Latino models. They are in demand by real estate, banking, communications, insurance and law-firm businesses, she said. Older models are harder to find.

"People in that age group don't think, 'Oh, I should try modeling'," she said. "If you are between age 20-25 is good, between 30-60 is great."

Vanchieri was impressed with Rebeca Orsatti, 51, a mother of five children from Mexico who lives in Amelia County with her husband, the Rev. Louis Orsatti, pastor of a Hispanic congregation at Branch's Baptist Church in South Richmond.

"She is beautiful. She is the age we want," she said.

Models make \$150 an hour, more for major projects such as billboards.

Ben Alonso, 27, a health-care planner for HIV services at Virginia Department of Health, said he was happy to be among the models.

"I think in business and other public service announcements, people identify best with people who look like them," he said.

Alonso said it felt natural to be in an outdoors setting, talking on the phone and having a picnic.

"Keeping a smile for a long time when nothing is really funny can be a little difficult," he said. "I need to work on that."

Diana Delcher, 27, who lives in Chesterfield County with her husband, Chris, came with their 5-month-old son Ian to the photo shoot.

She was paired with Panamanian Marcos Gonzalez, 30, to act as a family taking a walk in the garden.

"The acting was a little difficult," Delcher, an interpreter, translator and college student, said.

Delcher, a native of El Salvador, said it is satisfying to know that businesses are putting more attention to Latinos, she said.

"Now they know that we contribute our part to the economy, and they have to reach that group," she said.

Greg Simos, director of broadcast production at the Martin Agency, said that models from different racial and ethnic backgrounds are needed. Businesses that are not targeting specific markets want to reach people across the board, he said, and they want such diversity to be represented in their marketing.

When The Martin Agency has done advertising for clients marketing in Spanish-language media such as Telemundo or Univision, Latino models and writers have been hired.

"You can't necessarily just convert English to Spanish," he said. "The concept doesn't translate as well."

Having to go outside the local market for models and writers incurs additional expenses for production, Simos said.

"If we had a bigger base to choose from locally, it would be more cost-effective," he said. Tapping into the local population, "I think it's not only great for the advertisers, but for the community as a whole. It builds up the local community for advertisers and for feature producers who come to town."

Stacy Murphy, executive producer at Park Group, a production company in Richmond, has been producing commercials for 20 years, nine with her current employer.

A couple of years ago, Park Group did a bilingual commercial for Donate Life, she said.

"Often, talent did not come from Richmond," she said. "Everything had to come out of market or they shot a version in Spanish in places like Texas."

The company is working with another organ-donor client that wants a commercial for Asian communities, she said.

"I think that the name of the game seems to be diversity, diversity," she said. "It's sort of the mantra for every client out there."

It is key that Vanchieri and her agency is focusing on local talent, she said.

"There has been a need for Asians and Latinos," she said. "It's great for her to focus on this."

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