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MARTIN MIDDLE SCHOOL

**BODY:**

The following article was written, edited and photographed by the young women of [Latinitasmagazine.org](#), a multischool, nonprofit Austin program that publishes their work online. The American-Statesman is featuring the group by letting members tell the **Latinitas** story with their own words and pictures. - Omar L. Gallaga

Success. Fun. Determination. Being a proud Hispanic. Friendship. Breaking out of your clique. Exploration. These are just a few ideas that come to mind when Martin Middle School eighth-graders Denise Riojas and Brianna Walker talk about being in **Latinitas**, a magazine for young Hispanic women that is published online and produced by students.

"A lot of movies and TV shows have a white person as the main star. He lives in a mansion with Hispanic maids or the Hispanic girls are stereotypes; they don't finish school or they are pregnant. (It) even applies to boys - they are in gangs," said Denise, who has been in **Latinitas** after-school programs for two years. "But we are not all like that. We have high standards for ourselves. Where are girls like us in the media?"

Brianna shares other reasons for participating in **Latinitas** clubs for girls: "I am quiet. I don't express myself a lot, but **Latinitas** has opened me up more. I can actually get out of my shell." According to a U.S. Census report, Hispanics accounted for half the 2.9 million U.S. population growth from 2003 to 2004 and now constitute one-seventh of all people in the United States. The same report said the sustained growth of the Hispanic population of the United States - that is to say, people of Latin American origin - now makes it the country's largest minority.

Despite the growth of Latinos in numbers, the media available to this growing population haven't always kept up, especially for younger Latinas. Magazines such as *Latina* and *Latina Style* reach older readers, and they typically write about fashion, beauty, parenting and topics of interest to older Hispanic women. When you try to find Web sites or magazines for Latina girls or teens, only one comes up: **Latinitas** Magazine.

**Latinitas** is published monthly in English and Spanish online and produced in Austin. It has a sister version called

Teen **Latinitas** for girls older than 14. To get content from Hispanic girls in and outside Austin, **Latinitas** started after-school programs at six Austin schools: Martin, Fulmore, Webb and Pearce middle schools; Blackshear Elementary and Travis High School. **Latinitas** also has free workshops once a month at St. John's Public Library and works with other organizations in Austin doing workshops in Web design, Web safety, photography, radio and video production and college entrance. Most of **Latinitas'** programs are free. The girls do activities in media in the clubs and talk about being Latina.

Riojas said, "We all come from the same background - we like to joke about Latino things. When I watch George Lopez, I get the jokes. He is talking about true stuff in Mexican families."

In 2001, two University of Texas at Austin students, Laura Donnelly from New York City and Alicia Rascon from El Paso, were working on a project in Federico Subervi-Velez's service communications class "Latinos and Media," which he now teaches at Texas State University. Their project started as an assignment, but grew into **Latinitas**.

Seeing the project's national potential, Subervi-Velez sponsored the site's first domain name and has continued to work with the group as a mentor, adviser and board president.

"Most popular media, even Spanish-language media, repeatedly portray Latinas in stereotypical roles such as helpless, dependent, overly sexual, lacking educational ambitions, or as gang members. Such images don't contribute to Latinas developing positive self-images, self-esteem and self-concept," Subervi-Velez said. "Media created by and for Latina youth can help provide more realistic and positive images that do reflect their achievement, motivation, intelligence and personal drive to succeed in school and life. This is part of **Latinitas'** mission."

**Latinitas** has grown from publishing the work of a few UT undergraduates to the authentic voice of hundreds of Latina youth in and outside of Texas. "**Latinitas** magazine is different because it challenges Latina girls to do their best and it's very goal-focused," said Sandie Taylor, **Latinitas'** managing editor. "We are not interested in just reporting on how to get the hot boyfriend and where to find the next expensive fashion. Our stories reflect issues, culture and the Latina context."

In addition to editing **Latinitas**, Taylor meets weekly with high school students at **Latinitas'** Teen Reporter Intern Program at Travis High School. TRIP is a more sophisticated version of **Latinitas'** after-school clubs and is less activity-based and more like a newsroom where reporters submit stories for editing.

Taylor, who grew up in El Paso, will be working with **Latinitas'** founders to produce the first print version of **Latinitas** magazine by early 2008. She said **Latinitas** gives girls a chance to get a byline before finishing middle or high school and that seeing their names in print is incredibly inspiring for the girls involved in **Latinitas**.

**Latinitas** has a strong Texas following but is also read heavily in other Latino-heavy U.S. states, as well as Spain, Mexico and parts of South America. At its start, **Latinitas** received just a few hundred hits per month, but now gets tens of thousands of readers monthly. **Latinitas** was featured on the nationally syndicated Latino pop culture television program "American Latino" as well as in newspapers including the Wall Street Journal, the Washington Times and the Contra Costa Times. In 2004, **Latinitas** student reporters were acknowledged by the Austin Chronicle as the city's "Best Aspiring Journalists." **Latinitas** founder Alicia Rascon was honored last year by the Greater Hispanic Chamber of Commerce with its Luz de la Comunidad award for empowering Latina youths.

(BOX)

**Latinitas** filled a media void, founders say

**Latinitas** after-school program participants and junior reporters Brianna Walker and Denise Rioja, interviewed founders Laura Donnelly and Alicia Rascon.

Brianna Walker: How was **Latinitas** founded?

Laura Donnelly: **Latinitas** started as a class at UT-Austin. The assignment was to create media that was a benefit to Latinas. At the time there were no (magazines like) **Latinitas**. The only one out there was closing down. We

thought this was crazy. Latinos were the biggest minority out there. Alicia and I realized that this was much more than a class project.

Denise Riojas: What is your favorite part about **Latinitas**?

Donnelly: For me, I love **Latinitas** because I love the girls, They teach me things. What surprises me is their interest in media and technology, their opinions on pop culture and even politics. **Latinitas** is never dull.

Alicia Rascon: I like to see the girls succeeding in their education.

Walker: Do you think this program will improve education for Latinas?

Donnelly: **Latinitas** makes writing stories and using digital technology fun. We are also trying to teach that you can do difficult projects and succeed. Just this year you made your own Web sites, posted movie and celebrity reviews, and an advice column, and in a separate project you designed a business plan for your own beauty supply line.

(BOX)

A Latina's talent with camera comes into sharper focus

Ariana Montoya, an eighth-grader at Martin Middle School, is a member of the **Latinitas** Club at her school. This 13-year-old loves photography.

When asked what she like about photography, she answered happily, "because I can take pictures of anything I want, it's all random." She also said the pictures she always ends up taking are the silliest. She said that what she was most surprised about the photography lesson in Club **Latinitas** was how she was capturing moments with her friends.

When asked her what new things she had learned from the photography lessons at the club, she answered, "Even when you take random pictures, you have to know what kind of picture you want and (you must know) what you are doing."

-- Esmerelda Torres

Business savvy

Eighth-grader Brianna Walker is a 14-year-old who goes to Martin Middle School. Brianna tells us how using sound and radio for the **Latinitas** was her favorite activity.

Brianna created a radio commercial for a business plan. Hers was creating her own Latina beauty products. She had to write the commercial and read it and use sounds to make it sound good.

She states, "At first I was nervous because I didn't think it would be that good, but I think it wasn't so bad."

I asked Walker what she enjoyed from (**Latinitas'**) projects her response was, "That you don't have to be all pretty, you can be yourself."

I asked Walker if she could picture herself on the radio after the sound project. She said, "Most definitely, I enjoy radio and I can picture myself on 96.7!"

-- Jacinda Smith

As easy as 1-2-3 4!

Jacinda Smith, 13, loves to sing. She is soon to be a bassist and wants to start her own rock band. She is in love with Tyson Ritter, the lead singer of the All-American Rejects. Jacinda is in seventh grade at Martin Middle School. She was creating a sound piece, a commercial for her business plan in Club **Latinitas**.

"It was really, really fun and exciting." Jacinda said. She is working on her business, starting the Free Spirited Losers, a rock band. She also said that doing a sound project wasn't really that hard. She said, "We can act like ourselves."

Smith still is interested in doing more sound activities like radio, and can picture herself on the radio after this sound project. We will be hearing more of her on the radio, because her songs will be on the radio someday!

-- Sara Martinez

(BOX)

Meet a volunteer

Laura Monroy, 13, Club **Latinitas** junior reporter, interviewed fundraising committee volunteer Sarah Garza.

Laura Monroy: Why did you become interested in volunteering with **Latinitas**?

Sarah Garza: Because the goal was to help Latina girls succeed and gain confidence and express themselves through journalism and photography.

Do you speak Spanish?

Yes, some, but you don't need to, to be a part of **Latinitas**.

What does a **Latinitas** volunteer do?

In fundraising, we organize creative events to raise money for **Latinitas** mission. For example, this winter we organized UT's four Latina sororities and one at Texas State to create a supply drive for **Latinitas**. Hundreds of dollars worth of paper, pens and other supplies were collected from essentially a community of women who are living out **Latinitas**' success mission.

What do you think about the Latinas in the media today?

I like some of the Latina supermodels and actresses such as Salma Hayek and some parts of Latina media, but a lot is just focusing on their figure (rather) than their intelligence.

What do you think about politics today?

Some days, I feel that we are left out of important decisions and some days, I feel that we can make a big difference through our community effort and our protests.

(BOX)

Options to help **Latinitas** or to get involved

\* In a partnership with the National Las Comadres Comadrado, **Latinitas** presents Latinitasfest on Friday and Saturday at El Buen Samaritano, 7000 Woodhue Drive. Hispanic girls are invited to this youth portion of Las Comadres' national conference featuring workshops with media professionals and mentors. Workshop fee is \$25 per day. To register, go to [www.lascomadres.org](http://www.lascomadres.org) or call the number below.

\* Latino-themed photography donations are being accepted for **Latinitas**' 'Fotos de Mi Alma' Benefit Auction until April 27. Framed donations are encouraged, but not necessary. E-mail [laura@latinitas](mailto:laura@latinitas)

[magazine.org](http://magazine.org) or call the number below to donate.

\* **Latinitas** Magazine is hosting its 3-Annual Día de las Madres Writing/Art/Poetry contest. Girls can submit essays,

poetry and artwork about their mothers. Winning entries will be published in **Latinitas** magazine, and prizes will be awarded to winners at a reception. Girls can submit work through [latinitasawards@yahoo.com](mailto:latinitasawards@yahoo.com) or contact the number below.

\* Every month **Latinitas** hosts a free media workshop at the St. John's Branch of Austin's Public Library (7500 Blessing). On April 28, girls are invited for lessons in digital photography from 10:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

For information on registration or info about **Latinitas**, contact [info@latinitas](mailto:info@latinitas)

[magazine.org](http://magazine.org), call 322-9947 or send mail to P.O. Box 4284, Austin, TX 78765-4284

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