

**Maria Contreras-Sweet, 50**

MANAGING PARTNER/CO-FOUNDER, FORTIUS HOLDINGS  
BOARD DIRECTOR/EXECUTIVE CHAIRWOMAN, PROMERICA BANK

BY MELISSA BORDOW



**W**hen Maria Contreras-Sweet first arrived in the U.S. from Mexico with her mother and five siblings, she used to ask her mother why she worked so hard slicing chickens at a poultry factory and cleaning homes.

“Because,” her mother would tell the five-year-old, “someday you are going to work in an office, not in a factory, and you’re going to become a secretary.”

Contreras-Sweet became a secretary all right: the Secretary of the Business, Transportation and Housing Agency for the State of California, where she oversaw 42,000 employees and a \$14 billion budget.

She was the first Latina to hold a cabinet position in the California government. The California Department of Transportation, the Department of Motor Vehicles and the California Highway Patrol were just three of the six departments she oversaw. She held the position for five years, longer than any other person.

Her journey to the upper echelons of corporate and public life started early. As a child, she collected bottles and cans, and tied bows at local florists. “I always worked,” she says. “I think that is the immigrants’ story.”

As a young woman, she did become a secretary, but only for a brief time, in the office of the chief of staff of the speaker of the state assembly. As soon as Contreras-Sweet got a taste of public policy work and constituent relations, she blossomed. “It was like I found my place,” she says. She excelled in navigating the legislative process and soon, she became a field representative for the state assemblyman.

Later, she rose through the ranks of the 7UP/RC Bottling Co., where she became a vice president and equity partner. She later served on the board of directors of Blue Cross of California, as well as The California Endowment, a \$3 billion healthcare foundation.

The combination of corporate leadership, financial acuity and ability to work with constituents made her a perfect choice to serve in the California government.

Today Contreras-Sweet is embarking on a new venture: Officially, she is a board member and executive chairwoman of Promérica Bank, the first Latino-owned commercial bank to form in California in more than 30 years. Unofficially, she says she is helping Latinos achieve their dreams. Promérica Bank promises to provide much-needed capital to hardworking Latinos, often underserved by other banks. Promérica plans to offer counseling to people who want to create business plans—and personal service on-site to commercial entities. According to Contreras-Sweet, the cook toiling in the restaurant kitchen will now have access to financing to open a restaurant or an entire chain.

“Why stop there?” she asks. “I would love to see someone like him or her listed on the NASDAQ. We are not opening a bank just to have a bank,” Contreras-Sweet says. “We want it to be a way of life.” **lf**

**LA FAMILIA:** Married, three children  
**IN THE BEGINNING:** Born in Guadalajara, Mexico  
**ETHNIC BACKGROUND:** Mexican  
**HIGHER EDUCATION:** Attended Cal-State in Los Angeles, majored in political science with an emphasis in public administration; received a certificate in communications from the University of Southern California  
**FAVORITE FLICK:** *Amadeus*  
**FAVORITE LIBROS:** *The Women of Hope*. The book, which profiles Latina historical icons was published through Hispanas Organized for Political Equality (HOPE). It is currently out-of-print. Ms. Contreras-Sweet was the founding president of HOPE.  
**QUOTABLE QUOTES:** “It’s the distance you go; it’s not what you’re born with, it’s how far you travel.” and “It’s not the position we attain, it’s what we do with the position we attain.”  
—*Emilia Torres, Maria’s grandmother*  
**THE PERSON I ADMIRE MOST IS:** Emilia Torres, my grandmother