



# Girl Power

The STEM issue branches out to the funny pages

Who would have thought that STEM stereotypes would be tackled in the funnies?

Although adults are the ones focused like lasers on the STEM issue, a little girl with a lot of spunk and big dreams confronted the myth that minorities and girls are underachievers when it comes to science, technology, engineering and math. Her name is Gracie, she is about 8ish, and, by the way, she is a cartoon character who appeared this summer.

Gracie is one of the main characters in *Baldo*, a syndicated cartoon strip. She has a loving, close-knit family: her teenage brother Baldo, her great aunt Tia Carmen and her dad Sergio. By the way, Gracie is a little too independent

to be characterized as a “daddy’s girl.” In fact, she has a plan for her life, and her goals are not limited by others.

So, with all of the strength that a child can muster, Gracie — a Hispanic little girl — charged into the STEM arena. In the July 18 *Baldo* comic strip, which was carried by 200 newspapers, she matter-of-factly mentioned to Tia Carmen that she would focus on a “STEM area of study” when she went to college.



Hector Cantu

Gracie made a huge statement without really trying. While it is not uncommon to see STEM issues covered on the front pages of the nation’s newspapers, seeing the discussion migrating to the funny pages was unique.

The minds behind the daily comic strip are Hector Cantu and Carlos Castellanos. Gracie is a compilation of the “powerful” women they saw in their families and communities when they were

growing up. Cantu grew up in South Texas during the Chicano Power Movement and Gracie embodies some of these qualities. “She has a quest for knowledge, learning and being smart,” Cantu says.

*Baldo* is the most widely syndicated comic strip featuring Hispanic characters. (*Gordo*, however, which ran as a daily comic strip in papers from the 1940s to 1985, is thought to be the first comic strip featuring Hispanic characters.)

## Story behind the story

Cantu acknowledges that when he first heard about STEM and a White House initiative earlier in the summer he did not give the issue a second thought. He did, however, add the topic to issues he researches on Google. As Cantu reads up on certain subjects, sometimes he is inspired to weave the topic into the comic strip, which was the case with the STEM issue.

A few readers were so pleased, and surprised, to see the STEM issue in the comic strip that they sent e-mails thanking the writer and illustrator for addressing the topic. One person who was compelled to contact Cantu and Castellanos was Laura Jones. Jones started the GEMS Club: Girls Excelling in Math and Science in 1994 in

PHOTOS COURTESY OF HECTOR CANTU AND CARLOS CASTELLANOS

Northern Virginia.

Jones sums up her thoughts about this particular comic strip in three words: “It was perfect.”

Jones says the comic strip sends an important message, driving home the truth that every girl can dream. Jones was so excited after reading the comic strip that she went on Facebook to talk about it. “I want to keep all girls smart and confident.”

At the same time, Cantu points out that the many young girls reading the comic strip are getting the message that it is OK to study engineering. “Gracie is wise beyond her years,” he says.

Meanwhile, Castellanos says that Gracie is overly cute but a lot of what comes out of her mouth is contrary to her look. “She has a big brain in there somewhere. This little third grader wants to improve herself and the world around her.”

A goal for Cantu and Castellanos is to use their comic strip as a platform to “inspire little Latino kids to reach.” Cantu points out that the message of Gracie being a smart little girl is much needed because dropout rates are high in the Hispanic community. Gracie’s message is reaching children because little children read the funnies. “You need to start early,” Cantu says.

As for Tia Carmen, she is Old World, according to Cantu. She has a garden in her backyard, therefore, any talk of stems with her will be related to plants.

The comic strip is quite relevant to society today and mirrors scenarios within the Hispanic community, according to Ray Mellado, chairman and CEO of Great Minds in STEM. Mellado points out that quite often the parents and child care providers of many Hispanic children did not pursue STEM fields, therefore, they are not able to guide children concerning what it takes to enter a STEM career. He contends that the discussion between Tia Carmen and Gracie regarding the STEM issue highlights the “huge” awareness issue that must be addressed.

Based in Los Angeles, Great Minds in STEM helps develop partnerships between poor and underserved students, their parents and guardians and teachers in order to equip the students to study STEM fields at four-year institutions.



Carlos Castellanos

Algebra I and II, geometry, calculus, physics and chemistry are common classes that students have to take in order to prepare for STEM fields of study at the college level. Mellado contends that an 11th grader who decides that she wants a STEM career is less likely to enter that field if she has not taken specific math and science courses by then.

Typically, a student who is interested in STEM areas will start taking specific courses geared toward science and math starting in middle school.

“We work backward. We will ask what a child wants to be. Then

we take the parents, teachers and students through the process of what they have to do, the steps that it will take to get there,” he says.

Once a student has the basic math and science courses taken care of, the student will be in position when she enters college to select a specific STEM field of study, Mellado says.

Recent statistics, according to Mellado, indicate that in 2008, Hispanics earned 6.5 percent of bachelor’s in engineering at schools that had programs approved by the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology, or ABET. African-Americans earned 4.7 percent of the bachelor’s in engineering at institutions that had ABET-approved programs.

### How it all began

Growing up, Cantu was an avid fan of comic books. He thinks that his love of comic books played a great part in inspiring him to become a writer. *Spider-Man*, *The Avengers*, *X-Men* and *Justice League of America* were tops on his list.

Today, he still enjoys reading the comics, though his taste has changed a tad bit. As an adult connoisseur of comics, he is partial to *Pickles*, *Zits* and *Argyle Sweater*, which are daily comic strips. Cantu acknowledges, however, that what occupies space on his list of favorites changes from day to day. He likes to see what makes him laugh; then he makes an effort to transfer those concepts to *Baldo*.

While Cantu devoured comic books as a youngster, he also read *Mad* magazine. When he was 12 or so it was not unusual for him to send gags and drawings to the magazine. “I got the polite rejection letter,” he acknowledges.

Even though Cantu knew that he wanted to work for a newspaper, his desire and love for comics was always just under the surface.

Cantu honed his writing and journalism skills at several publications when he worked as a reporter, a copy editor and a managing editor. His professional journalism career started in the late ’80s. Cantu worked at the *Arlington Daily News*, the *San Antonio Light*, the *Dallas Times Herald* and *Hispanic Business* magazine. After pausing for a second or two, Cantu indicated that “none of these papers are still around.” He then burst out laughing.

He graduated from the University of Texas-Austin in 1984 with a degree in journalism.

When Cantu headed to Santa Barbara, Calif., to work for *Hispanic Business*, he crossed paths with Carlos Castellanos. The two did not meet face to face for a number of years; Castellanos lived in Florida and worked as a freelance illustrator for the magazine. Cantu, however, thought that Castellanos did great work and his idea for a comic strip started taking shape. Cantu pitched the idea to his wife first and she told him to “go for it.”

After getting the green light from his wife, Cantu knew that the comic strip needed a niche. “We wanted something that was different — a cat or an animal we can’t do, that exists.” The two knew that in order to be successful they had to do something new.

The comic strip is new ground for the seasoned journalist and gives him a “fun new way” of writing for the newspaper. ▣

— By Keshia Moorefield