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## Where Are They Now?

Ten years ago, at the launch of LATINA Style Magazine in the atrium of the Rayburn House Office Building, Anna Maria Arias, founder and then-editor of LATINA Style, unveiled the premier issue of a historic magazine.

Featured on the cover were three Latinas, the first three - and at that time the only - Hispanic women elected to the U.S. House of Representatives.



They were the Honorable Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, Lucille Roybal-Allard and Nydia Velázquez. Now, 10 years later, we revisit that important first issue with a reproduction of the initial cover, and we reconnect with those trailblazing Latinas in three exclusive interviews retrospective of the past decade.

Columns & Departments

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Congresswoman **Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL)**, the first Latina ever elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, has been a representative of Florida's 18th

### What were your biggest challenges 10 years ago and how have they changed?

I think that the world that we face today is very different than the world that we faced - that we thought we were facing 10 years ago. ... We would have never thought that we would be talking about terrorism as much as we're talking about it now. Ten years ago we would not have thought that we would be in a situation internationally like we find ourselves. However, domestically, even though things have improved we still have a long ways to go ... in the Hispanic community. We need to make better strides in education, in employment opportunities, in many of the health care disparities that exist.

### Do you have a specific example of something that made especially proud?

I think as I saw more Latinas getting elected to Congress, that has made me very proud. We have a very good Congressional delegation of Latinas, and I think that we try our very best to represent our communities, even if we're from New York, or Florida or California, or wherever we may be, we're working together as a team, and that helps a lot. ... Every year we're going to have more Latinas elected at all levels of government, but especially here in Congress. When I was the first one, I never said that I was the only. I always said, "I'm the first," because I knew that many more Hispanas would follow me, and I'm very honored to be in their presence and very pleased to see our numbers grow.

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**What did you hope to accomplish when you first took office, and have you been successful?**

I've been very successful with the legislation that I have been promoting on the domestic front about education and health care. We passed a very good prescription drug plan, we reformed Medicare, we've made health care more accessible. ... Those have been important issues for my district, and I feel that we've accomplished a lot. ... And then internationally, I think now we see the dangers around us and we're better able to promote human rights around the world, and to protect our neighbors from the terrorists that surround them.



**Does the increase make a difference in your working environment?**

Are you able to form an alliance or at least some sort of relationship with the other six Congresswomen?

I think that we're a positive force in that maybe we have different ways of looking at issues, and different ways of expressing it, and we try to be more in touch with our communities, so I think we bring a fresh focus on different issues. ... We don't get together very often, but we get along very well. We work on many issues together, and we have a very good partnership. I don't get together with them as often as I'd like, but I find them all to be positive contributors in the democratic process, and I'm honored to be in their presence.



Congresswoman **Nydia Velázquez**, a representative of New York's 12th district since 1992, was the first Puerto Rican woman elected to the U.S. House of Representatives.

**What were your biggest challenges 10 years ago? What are they today?**

My greatest professional challenge 10 years ago was breaking into the political arena ... to successfully win my bid for Congress, becoming the first Puerto Rican woman ever elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. I think that all groups in the minority, including women, Afro-Americans, the handicapped, may have to work harder because some people sometimes view them differently. So that's the real challenge. ... I think I am regarded as a strong and capable leader. There will always be people with negative beliefs about women, power and politics, but I am confident that through the work that I do, along with the work of my other Latina colleagues in Congress, that we can successfully change that mindset. You know, our world - and this is something that every time I have an opportunity I always say - the face of America is changing, and the face of New York City is changing. It's becoming increasingly diverse, and having women and other diverse groups in

Latinos in my district were neglected, they really didn't have real representation, so I wanted to ensure that they were heard when policies were made that affected them. When I came to Congress I knew that I wanted to have a seat on the Small Business Committee because I understood, based on the experience of my own father, that small businesses had a vital role to play in our economy. In 1998 I was elected by my colleagues in that committee as the ranking democratic member, and that was ... a great honor.

**When we featured you 10 years ago in our first issue there were three Latina Congresswomen, and now there are seven. How do you view this increase?**

I'm glad that we are seven now, and I think that women are slowly, slowly but surely breaking through the glass ceiling of politics, but we still have a long way to go. Just seven out of 435 members, and there are no Hispanic women Senators, even though Hispanics are the fastest growing ethnic group in the United States today. I

politics is key to change.



**What were your goals 10 years ago when you entered office?**

My first goal was to give a voice to the people that I represented.

think having strong Latinas around me is always a good thing because we face similar obstacles and we support one another. It's an incredible support that is so needed.



**What hopes do you have for Latinas in this country?**

First and foremost, Latinas are such an important part of the United States' society. From entertainment to politics to business, Latinas are making real strides. I want to see that that continues, and I want to encourage that kind of empowerment. There are misconceptions and stereotypes that still exist, but I believe that we can start to chip away at them and open the door for the future generation of Latinas. I feel like the work we are doing today will help the future Latina leaders of tomorrow. Believe me, I hope that it's going to be much, much easier in the next four years for many other Latinas to be able to run for political office and to win those elections.

A California native, Congresswoman **Lucille Roybal-Allard** became the first Mexican-American elected to Congress when in 1992 she became the representative of California's 34th district.

**What were your greatest professional challenges 10 years ago, and what are they today?**

I think that one of the greatest challenges that I had as a new member of Congress was learning about the culture here in Washington and in Congress, getting to know 435 members of Congress, learning the rules of the House, how committees run, and getting to understand the inner workings of the House and the Senate because it's very, very different here in Washington than it is, say, at a state legislature, for which I had six years of experience.

The challenges now, particularly as a member of the minority party, are to push forward for the policy that I believe are important to the people that I represent, and to make sure that there's adequate funding to support the programs that can improve their lives. The best example I think is the whole issue of education, and the programs such as Leave No Child Behind, the bilingual education programs - programs that are intended to help disadvantaged children and communities are clearly being cut back, and that is definitely one of the great challenges. It's not only in education, it's health care, it's job training. In every area there are challenges to try and push for as much federal support as we possibly can have in order to improve the quality of life for people in my district.

**Have anything surprised you since you came to Congress?**

One of the biggest surprises I had when it came to Congress was how little my senior colleagues, those that were already in Congress, knew about Latinos. That was the big surprise. We were generally a mystery to the majority of my colleagues.

**Is that still true?**

Not any longer.

**You have a much larger representation now.**

We not only have much larger representation, but, with the growth and the seniority of Hispanic members of Congress, we have been very, very active in educating our colleagues about Latinos, about the things that are important to our community, and demonstrating that, in reality, what Latinos care about the most is no different than what any other American cares about - good education for their children, a safe community, a safe environment, good paying jobs, economic development. ... Although I think the only place that Latinos may have a little bit more focus and interest in would be the whole issue of immigration. And even then we've been able to give our perspective and to educate our colleagues about immigration, about immigrants, and about the value of immigrants to this country.



**When you took what did you hope to accomplish, and do you feel you've been successful?**

One of the things that I hoped to accomplish when I first took office in Washington was to help my constituents to understand Washington better by demystifying the political process and helping to open doors for them so they could take full advantage of federal funding and opportunities to help improve their quality of life. ... The most exciting part about being in the position I am, about being an elected official, is to actually be able to empower people to help themselves and to improve their community.



*by Bernadette Rivero*

[This article has been edited for [www.latinastyle.com](http://www.latinastyle.com). For the full version, check out the May/June issue of *LATINA Style*.]

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**Speaking of the representation in Congress, when we featured you in our first issue, there were three Latina Congresswomen, and now there are seven. Do you attribute this increase to anything?**

The most practical reason is, of course, with redistricting. I think that has created more Latino districts just because of our population. But the fact that Latinas have been able to successfully run in these districts I think says a lot about the way our community and others think, not just about women but about Latinas. I think that we have proven that we're not only willing but that we are more than capable of dealing with the important issues that impact not only our communities but our nation and the world. And that because of that recognition about the special and unique talent that women and Latina women bring to the policy table, we have been able to get more women and more Latinas elected.

**What hopes do you have for Latinas in this country?**

I think progress has been made if you compare it to where we were in the past, but if you compare it to where we want to be, Latinas still have a long way to go. We have one of the highest dropout rates, one of the highest suicide rates, we have still many problems with health. ... My dream is that some day every child - Latina, Latino, or otherwise - will have all the opportunities they need to develop their talents to their fullest ability so that they can have choice in their life to be whatever it is that they want to be.