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Chain of support Each sibling forms a link in the Murguia chain

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The Murguias of Kansas City, Kan., are a remarkable family. But the family - Amalia Murguia and her seven children - doesn't like to boast. There is no loud bragging about the two federal judges and the vice chancellor of the University of Kansas that number among the brood. Still Amalia is proud and maybe just as proud that her older kids helped make the successes of the younger ones.

Alfred Murguia Jr. stands in the yard outside his mother's home and talks about his family - about how the family doesn't see itself as being extraordinary, just fortunate. "We didn't have a lot of money, but we had a lot of love," he says.

The house where he and his six siblings grew up is gone now, but his mother still lives in the neighborhood. Two sons, Carlos and Ramon, live nearby, in impressive side-by-side homes that easily pass for mansions in this modest Argentine area of KCK. It's a tight family - three of the kids still live with Mom. Only the youngest, the twins - Janet and Mary - live more than a walk away.

One of those twins, Janet Murguia, leaves her No. 2 position at the University of Kansas next month to assume the leadership of the National Council of La Raza, a Latino organization based in Washington.

Cars pass by every few minutes, and Alfred waves as horns honk. Everyone here knows the man standing in the yard - and the family inside the house, gathered to celebrate the Christmas holidays.

But the people not from this Argentine neighborhood don't usually consider the Murguias as a group - and they don't understand that the Murguias have achieved their individual accomplishments not individually, but as a family.

One big chain

"We're one big chain," Carlos Murguia says. "If not for one, the chain would be broken." The oldest daughters - Martha Hernandez and Rosemary Murguia - helped take care of their younger brothers and sisters when they were growing up. Martha has now worked for 30 years for Crown Center Culinary Concepts. Rosemary recently quit her job to help care for her mother and take care of the family home.

Alfred Jr., who works in catering at the Westin Crown Center hotel, was the first to go to college. When it was his younger siblings' turns, he helped fill out paperwork and coached them. Ramon recalls how his older siblings always shared. If they had extra money, they would give some to their younger brothers and sisters.

"When you have one cereal box with one toy and seven kids you learn how to be fair and just," Ramon Murguia says.

In the living room of Amalia's home, photographs of the Murguia children dominate one wall. Amalia sits quietly, not the center of attention, but clearly the center of the family. The children

talk cautiously - they don't want to seem boastful, they say. They don't want to hold themselves above any other family in Argentine. There are many families, many Hispanic families, that have accomplished great things, they say. They are but one story of many that should be told.

The four lawyers, Ramon, Carlos, Janet and Mary, are accustomed to reporters and reporters' questions. They're prepared and sometimes passionate, but they don't pontificate.

The only question that catches them off guard is about their father. Alfred Sr. died just over two years ago. When his name comes up, grief envelops them. So much so that the room falls quiet for a few moments. It's several weeks later before Mary Murguia explains: The pain is still too new. They are still overwhelmed by his absence, she says.

Beginnings in Mexico

Alfred Murguia Sr., the oldest in his family, had to leave school after he'd finished the sixth grade because his father had died - it was his responsibility to support the rest. Born in Oklahoma, he moved to his ancestral home in tiny Tangancichuaro, west of Mexico City. Amalia was born there and she, too, was the oldest child. When her mother died, she also quit school, in the fifth grade, to take care of her younger siblings.

Amalia married young but her first husband died when she was pregnant. From that marriage came her oldest daughter, Martha Hernandez. Meanwhile, Alfred had moved to Kansas City, Kan., in 1945. Later, in 1952, Amalia moved to KCK with Martha and married Alfred. Martha, now 60, was eventually joined by the children of the new marriage: Alfred Jr., now 51; Rosemary, 50; Carlos, 46; Ramon, 44; and Janet and Mary, who are now 43.

Alfred Sr. worked at the Kansas City Structural Steel Co. Each day he came home to eat lunch with his wife and children, who came home for lunch from school. The Murguias say there were never any edicts that they would attend college or become successful. Instead, they say, their lessons were the values they learned.

"We saw that they wanted better choices for their children," Janet Murguia says. "Education was the key to that. We recognized that they were making a sacrifice to make our lives better." The lawyer lineup
Four of the Murguias are lawyers.

Carlos Murguia was named United States district judge for the District of Kansas in 1999. He was a Wyandotte County district court judge before that.

Mary Murguia is a federal judge in Arizona. Before that, she worked with the U.S. attorney's office, both in Arizona and Washington, D.C. She and Carlos are the only set of siblings sitting on the federal bench in the United States.

Ramon Murguia is a Harvard-educated lawyer and a community activist who served three years on the board of directors of the National Council of La Raza, based in Washington, D.C., and the leading organization for Latinos. He served as its chairman. He is an active lawyer in the Kansas City area.

Perhaps the best known family member is Janet. Last month she was named the executive director and chief operating officer of the National Council of La Raza. Next month she'll leave her job as executive vice chancellor for university relations at the University of Kansas to move back to Washington. Before her KU job, she worked in the White House for President Bill Clinton, and also as deputy campaign manager in the presidential bid of Al Gore. Ramon and Carlos are married and have children; Alfred Jr. is divorced with children. The four women siblings are unmarried.

The family's accomplishments leave others searching for a reason, a secret, a trick. And the Murguias offer none. They say it's just the way they were raised - they say it together and

separately. They're just trying to live by the example their parents passed on to them, Janet Murguia says - a strong sense of family, faith and devotion to community. All Catholic, the KC Murguias can be seen every Sunday sitting together near the front at St. John the Evangelist/Divine Church in Kansas City, Kan.

Family first

David Chavez of Olathe, a regional director of La Raza, knows the Murguias well. He says they're comfortable with who they are and where they came from.

"One of their best attributes is that they are so grounded," Chavez says. "They aren't really caught up in their success. That sounds like something small, but it isn't."

The Murguias say they learned a strong work ethic from their father. Even though he had a limited education, he was good at math and used that in his job. From him they also learned a commitment to community and country.

"One of the things we saw with people growing up in our community is that there was no one there to help," Ramon Murguia says. "There was no one there to help people navigate all these systems. People need help."

When La Raza announced last month that Janet Murguia would be its new leader, she told her siblings first - and then her mother. Although she's spent a lot of time away from family, to leave them was still a difficult decision. Her siblings laugh as they recall when Janet lived in Washington the first time. Amalia Murguia told her daughter to come back to Kansas; if she needed a job, she could help around the house. Amalia also couldn't understand why Ramon wouldn't go to the KU Law School, instead of Harvard. They also recalled that Amalia Murguia cried when Carlos moved away from her- from four doors down to two blocks away.

Amalia Murguia doesn't mind traveling miles, and then cooking, to preserve family and tradition. When Mary Murguia worked for Attorney General Janet Reno, the attorney general went to Janet's apartment in Washington for a traditional Mexican family dinner cooked by Amalia. Her children say Amalia was frustrated because the attorney general couldn't let Amalia feed the Secret Service agents gathered in the hall outside the apartment.

Like Amalia, Alfred Murguia Sr. was proud of his children but also humble, his children recall. He would hand out his children's business cards to people.

Ramon Murguia says he can't imagine taking a job that would move him away from his family. "I'm not that courageous," he says.

Loyal to community

Ramon says he and his siblings are loyal to their community. His children and Carlos' children attend public schools in Kansas City, Kan. Ramon Murguia laughs a little when asked why he and Carlos built homes in Argentine when they could have opted for a tonier neighborhood.

"We invest in our community," Ramon says. "People who have means can live in an urban area." The Murguias also invest in one another. They talk constantly. The three sons have had Chiefs season tickets together for years. The twins talk to each other several times a week. All of the children, near and far, call Amalia at least once a day.

"When one of us makes a friend, we all make a friend," Ramon says. "We make a friend on behalf of the family, not on behalf of any individual."

And Ramon says about his siblings, "Anything I had, I would give to them." Perhaps that is the secret to all the Murguia successes.

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