

POWER ADVICE

## WHY LEADERS NEED SELF- REFLECTION

**Empathy and communication** are common threads in Maria Jimenez-Lara's professional and personal life. From a young age, she understood the difficulties children can face at school. When she was 5, she moved from Puerto Rico to Miami and learned English as her second language.

"I know what it's like to sit in the classroom and not understand what's going on," she says.

Those and other experiences fueled her passion for children and education, which combine in her role as CEO of the Naples Children & Education Foundation, a non-profit helping underprivileged and at-risk children in Collier County. NCEF has raised more than \$176 million since 2001. The foundation gave \$15.1 million in grants in 2018 to 33 nonprofits plus "strategic initiative partners" representing 14 organizations focused on areas such as hunger, mental health and vision.

Before working at NCEF, Jimenez-Lara served as director of charter schools at Redlands Christian Migrant Association (RCMA), bringing aid and awareness to at-risk youth. Shifting from the receiving end to the giving side, Jimenez-Lara started working at NCEF in 2012 as grants director. In 2015, she was promoted to CEO of the organization, which has 12



**MARIA JIMENEZ-LARA**

AGE: 49

**PERSONAL:** Husband Jorge Lara, children Melannie and Caesar, nephew Jerry

**HOMETOWN:** Miami

**EDUCATION:** Master's of Public Administration from Hodges University; bachelor's degrees from Florida International University and Universidad de las Americas

**WORK HISTORY:** CEO, Naples Children & Education Foundation (formerly Grants Director at NCEF, 2012-2015); Director of Charter Schools, Redlands Christian Migrant Association (1999-2012); Director, ASPIRA of Florida (a nonprofit educational and youth leadership program in Miami) (1993-1999)

**VOLUNTEER WORK:** Includes serving on the District XI Juvenile Justice Board

full-time employees and an annual budget of just under \$4 million.

"I knew the impact of the orga-

nization was big, but going through the many grants that are submitted and eventually funded helped me see the whole picture and how vital NCEF's involvement is to address the variety of needs in Collier County," she says.

The entirety of NCEF's funding is raised during its flagship annual event, the Naples Winter Wine Festival. Tickets to the January 2018 affair started at \$10,000 per couple, and 2019 ticket packages start at \$12,500 per couple. The highest bid during the 2018 international auction rang in at \$780,000 for a purple Rolls-Royce Phantom.

The festival has raised an average of about \$12.5 million each year, Jimenez-Lara says.

As CEO, she says she has learned the importance of understanding the specialized part each person plays. "Each player within an organization has a distinct role," she says, "but everyone is equally important. And everyone has to function within their area of expertise and at their best capacity."

NCEF consistently assesses what is working and what can be done better. "Self-reflection is an important practice," Jimenez-Lara says.

"By taking a deeper look at our needs at NCEF, we are able to effectively match the expertise of our staff to the areas that need to be addressed and improved. It has shown us the importance of utilizing our resources and how to effectively work toward improvement and success across the board," she says.

She also stresses the importance of communication.

"[It] is a large factor in keeping the team focused on the big picture

and making sure they understand their role as it plays into our greater mission," she says.

Jimenez-Lara says her parents helped shape her approach to her work. Her mother also worked at RCMA, and her father, who worked at IBM, taught her the importance of relationships.

"He always made it a point to personally connect with each per-

son he worked with and genuinely cared about each member of the team," she says of her dad's relationship with the IBM sales team. "From asking about their families and personal lives, to ensuring they were on the path to success at the office, he was very methodical about relationship-building. I firmly believe that over time, his relationships with each of the peo-

ple were strengthened because of his efforts, which led to having a more cohesive and solid team."

She says both her parents taught her the importance of taking care of your community and leaving it in better shape than when you found it.

She adds: "That value tends to filter in everything that I do."

—Christina Pullano