

## Latino solidarity marks 75 years

Phi Iota Alpha fraternity traces its roots to RPI and a tradition of brothers helping brothers

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TROY -- Members of an international Latino fraternity helped build the Panama Canal. Four became presidents of Latin American countries. Today, many serve as engineers and businessmen in their communities.

This weekend, more than 100 members of Phi Iota Alpha gathered at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the organization, which traces its roots to RPI.

The event attracted about 60 members who graduated from RPI, and 50 Phi Iota Alpha alumni from chapters across the country.

Several alumni who attended Sunday's brunch at RPI's Heffner Alumni House said the fraternity was a home away from home for them.

"Hispanics are very close-knit with their families and have a very structured support system within their families, and when you leave home, you look for that support somewhere else," said Jason Martinez, who is now a teacher in the Bronx. "I found it here."

Martinez attended RPI in 1999 and 2000, but graduated from the City College of New York. He was born in New York City, and his parents are from Puerto Rico.

Felderi Santiago struggled when he first arrived at RPI in 1998. He was pursuing a dual major in electrical engineering and computer systems engineering, but he earned a C in his first computer science class.

He had never tried computer programming before, and he was lost. He sought out the Latino fraternity and the brothers became his tutors. He received an A in his next computer class and eventually graduated with a 3.3 grade-point average.

"Their help and focus helped me do well academically," said Santiago, who joined the fraternity.

Santiago is a computer systems consultant in Yonkers.

Even over a century ago, "RPI was one of the best universities in the United States, so Latin American countries sent their best students there," said Victor Marrero, a doctoral student and current president of RPI's Phi Iota Alpha chapter.

In 1898, a dozen or so Latin American students formed Union Hispano Americana, a secret society based on the ideology of Pan-Americanism, the unification of the 21 Latin American countries. Most of the students called one of those Latin nations home.

Little is known about the members, because they did not keep records, but in 1919, the group merged with two Latino fraternities, Phi Lambda Alpha of the University of California at Berkeley, and Pi Delta Phi of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The new group called itself Pi Delta Phi and adopted the mission of Union Hispano.

At the same time, Louisiana State University's Sigma Iota international Latino fraternity formed. Initially, it grew rapidly, but by 1928, several chapters had fizzled out.

The groups negotiated a merger during a three-day convention in December 1931 at RPI, and Phi Iota Alpha was born.

The fraternity still maintained its philosophy of unifying the Latin American countries, but by the 1950s, the mission had transformed from political to economic unification, similar to the present-day European Union.

The 1960s were difficult for the brotherhood as the number of Latino college students fell dramatically during the Vietnam War. The last members of the RPI chapter and the LSU chapter graduated in 1973 and 1976, respectively.

"But the alumni network was alive," Marrero said.

In 1984, RPI's college newspaper profiled an alumnus and former brother of the Latino fraternity. The story caught the attention of about a dozen undergraduates who rekindled the fraternity. It spread across the nation again.

Most of the young men who joined after 1984 are American-born, Marrero said.

Today, there are 31 chapters and more than 400 active members and thousands of alumni.

The fraternity still works toward Latin American unification. Its members helped initiate a student-exchange program between RPI and universities in Venezuela and Puerto Rico.

The fraternity brothers also volunteer at Albany's Centro Civico Hispanoamericano and sponsor a summer camp there. They host discussions about Latin American issues on campus.

One of the main perks of membership is access to the extensive alumni network. Hispanic recruiters who come to campus job fairs are often members of the fraternity, and the fraternity's alumni try to open doors for the young Latino graduates.

Last year, four seniors who were members of Phi Iota Alpha all had job offers months before graduation. Each offer was arranged with the help of a brother.

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