

Empowering the Next Generation of Healthcare Leaders

BY NOAH JOHNSON

Lorie Thibodeaux founded the La Mesa Emerging Leader Program to bridge the gap for early-career Latino healthcare professionals

WHEN LORIE THIBODEAUX REFLECTS ON her earliest memories, she recalls the warm summers she'd spend in Panama with her abuela (grandmother), a revered figure in their community known for her boundless generosity and unwavering compassion.

"People really loved her in the community," says Thibodeaux, founder of La Mesa Emerging Leaders Program at the National Association of Latino Healthcare Executives (NALHE). "If they didn't have food, any change, or any basic needs, they would ask her. And she was always willing to give what she had. That taught me that even if we have what we need, there are others who don't. And we have to share those pieces of ourselves with them."

For more than a decade, Thibodeaux dedicated her career to meeting people where they're at and filling gaps in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) through a wide

variety of roles, such as a program manager, DEI consultant, public speaker, and board member for several healthcare organizations. Her efforts have paved the way for innovative programming that addresses community health issues, promotes social gatherings for healthcare executives, and provides several employee resource groups.

Thibodeaux stands out as a DEI champion through her affiliation with the NALHE, which was founded in 2005 to increase senior-level Latino representation in hospitals and health systems across the US. In fact, some of her most impactful work with the organization came during a tumultuous time.

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, when she was the founder and president of the Dallas-Fort Worth chapter, Thibodeaux made a concerning observation: "A lot of early career professionals

couldn't find jobs and were having a really difficult time building connections," she says. "In the midst of job losses and uncertainty, we recognized the need to provide support and mentorship."

Their response? The La Mesa Emerging Leaders Program. Founded in 2020 by Thibodeaux and founding chair Jackie Sifuentes, the program created a space for early careerists to build community while acquiring new skills and professional development opportunities through one-on-one mentorship, fireside chats, resume reviews, interview training, and more. Participants are also taught to embrace cultural heritage, foster inclusivity, and champion authenticity.

As the program's founder, Thibodeaux not only oversees operations and nurtures partnerships with the healthcare community to support participants, but she sets the program's



Lorie Thibodeaux
Founder of La Mesa Emerging Leaders Program
National Association of Latino Healthcare Executives



Left to right: Elizabeth Godines, Jackie Sifuentes, Lorie Thibodeaux, and Veronica Rodriguez. (Photo by Ron Diamond)

vision. For her, that vision is “to empower the next generation of healthcare leaders.”

“I founded this program with a vision to be the person I wish was there for me when I was navigating this space,” the New Orleans native says. “In essence, the La Mesa Emerging Leaders Program stands as a beacon of empowerment. It became not just a local initiative but a movement to inspire change and break down barriers in healthcare leadership across the nation.”

So far, the program has seen three successful cohorts with fifty-six graduates nationwide. Some have gone back to school to pursue higher education degrees. Others have been promoted to some of the most prestigious fellowships and started their own local National Association of Latino Healthcare Executive, building chapters nationwide. Thibodeaux believes the values they were taught will inspire

others and contribute to a more equitable and inclusive future in healthcare.

“This program is really about servant leadership and serving others. It requires serving with your heart,” she says. “The path is not easy for a lot of Latino healthcare executives who are first in their family, but this program makes it possible for them to know where to start and that they are not alone.”

Thibodeaux understands how hard the early career years can be, too. While she didn’t have to navigate a pandemic, she graduated from the University of Missouri-Columbia at the peak of a recession when jobs were few and far between. That experience, paired with the need to serve others imparted by her grandmother, informs how she shaped the La Mesa program.

“There was a job fair that I attended where I met with a great ally who connected me with

the right people and helped me get my foot in the door in the healthcare industry. It was because of someone that was willing to go the extra mile to get me an opportunity and that has continued to inspire me to do the same for others,” she explains.

In the future, Thibodeaux and her colleagues hope to expand mentorship opportunities, offer additional specialized trainings, extend outreach and partnerships, and offer more imaginative programming. Until then, she’d like to offer aspiring healthcare leaders some advice: embrace authenticity, cultivate resilience, and lead with empathy despite any doubts about their goals.

“We often doubt ourselves and tell ourselves that we can’t do it, but we need to be constantly reminded of the strength we carry, and we have to use that to propel us forward,” she says. “Just go for it!” □