

# IN THE NEWS

## HISPANIC CHAMBER HONORS AREA WOMAN, COMPANY ; PRIMERA PLASTICS CEO 'HONORED' HIS FIRM WAS SELECTED AS 2005 BUSINESS OF THE YEAR

Martinez, S  
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Since he started Primera Plastics Inc. a decade ago, Noel Cuellar's focus has been on giving back. He believes that approach is why his business is thriving and his employees are loyal and hard-working. Cuellar's business received its most recent accolade when the West Michigan Hispanic Chamber of Commerce named Primera Plastics 2005 Business of the Year. "We are very honored. It was a surprise for us," Cuellar said, adding the company will celebrate the award with a cookout this week for employees. "Without them, this wouldn't be possible," said Cuellar, 43, president and chief executive officer of the Zeeland firm.

A manufacturer of precision plastic pieces for the automotive and furniture industries, Primera employs 140 people. Nearly 80 percent are Hispanic. "I feel very strongly about giving back, especially with the Hispanic community. I feel what I have been given is a blessing and it is my responsibility to pass it on," Cuellar said. He is proud that seven Primera employees are continuing their education with the company picking up the tab. It makes good business sense to help your employees grow with your company, Cuellar said. With annual sales of \$15 million, Primera expects to double production in the next two years.

Other honors In 2001, Primera received Johnson Controls Inc.'s Silver Award, given to the corporation's best national supplier for quality, delivery and cost. Last year, the company received the Zeeland Chamber of Commerce's Community Image Award for its \$3.6 million, 70,000-square-foot facility constructed in 2003. Primera is a member of the Zeeland chamber, and Cuellar is on the board of director of the Holland Area Chamber of Commerce. In addition to being a member of the Hispanic chamber, Cuellar is a member of the Michigan Minority Business Development Council. Of all Primera's honors, the Hispanic Chamber's awards may be the sweetest, Cuellar said. "As a Hispanic, I feel like we are finally getting the recognition that we are capable and able to achieve success in business."

The root of any success begins with education, he said. "Knowledge is power," said Cuellar, who barely graduated from Holland High School. The son of migrant workers, Cuellar began working at the Heinz Inc. factory in Holland after high school. A little more than two decades later, when he was an employee at the former Prince Corp. -- now part of JCI -- he decided to go to college. He enrolled in night classes at Grand Rapids Community College to study plastics manufacturing, but left about a semester shy of completing his degree to devote more time to his growing company.

Primera's investment in the Holland community includes providing scholarships for low-income students in Holland Public Schools, a district from which both Cuellar and his wife, Janet, graduated. Primera also has supported Maple Avenue Ministries, which offers inner-city programs for children and provided the seed money for the city's annual Tulipanes Latino Arts & Film Festival, which celebrates Hispanic culture. A few weeks ago, Cuellar -- with friend Frank Garcia, Holland superintendent -- helped start the Hispanic Educators, Leaders and Professionals (HELP) mentoring program at West and East middle schools.

Students will be teamed up with individual mentors, who will help them reach their potential by providing information on life skills, career exploration, academic support, corporate tours and shadowing experiences. "We are helping students at an earlier stage," said Cuellar, who hopes to pass on one pearl of wisdom he has gained. "I learned at an early age, it doesn't matter what others think of me. It's what I think of me."



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