Latinos Make New Gains in Media Industry

By Miki Johnson

Eva Longoria may play a desperate housewife on the ABC hit series, but her phenomenal success has made other aspiring Latino actors more hopeful about their chances of breaking into the media industry, according to panelists at an event held on Monday, Dec. 5, at Columbia.

The panel was sponsored by Nielsen Media Research and organized by the National Hispanic Foundation for the Arts (NHFA) in cooperation with the School of the Arts (SOA) and the Center for Career Education (CCE).

NHFA, created in 1997 by Felix Hernandez and actors Jimmy Smits, Sonia Braga and Esai Morales, aims to increase Hispanic representation in the media, telecommunications and entertainment industries. On Monday evening, NHFA brought to Columbia luminaries from CBS, ABC, Scholastic Entertainment to offer advice on how to get started in television.

Much of the evening’s conversation centered on the place of minorities in the industry. Felix Sanchez, NHFA chairman and the evening’s moderator, pointed out that until Longoria made her breakthrough in 2004, prime time had not seen a Latina leading lady—and there are eight this season, he said.

While the reasons for increased Latino opportunities are difficult to pinpoint, panelists’ suggestions included their growing numbers and buying power, five years of diversification within media companies; and “copycatting” by other networks eager to mimic the success of the TV series Desperate Housewives. Josie Thomas, senior vice president of diversity at CBS, said that her network has pushed diversity by offering bonuses to people “who think outside the box and who prove their commitment to diversity” by coming up with “multicultural talent showcases.”

Tanya Menton, vice president of litigation and employment practices for CBS, said that the network had recently started a talent development program for aspiring writers, actors, directors and producers. Menton noted that although the program is “color-blind”—for legal reasons and because of the network’s preference for hiring employees for their talent, rather than to fill quotas—program participants have nevertheless been diverse, something she and others at ABC were pleased to see.

“It’s not just diversity in front of the cameras,” she added, touching on yet another reason why more Latinos are appearing on prime time. Because more minorities are involved in all aspects of creation (idea development, advertising and writing), more and better, minority parts are being written, she said.

Another panelist, Arminda Figueroa, urged the students in attendance to look beyond the usual venues Figueroa is project director for Maya and Miguel, a new animated PBS children’s show—which she described as an “authentic program about Latino children.” Although young artists don’t always think of it, they should consider PBS and the U.S. Department of Education, she said, both of which are huge generators and consumers of TV content.

The NHFA has been a strong SOA supporter and regularly awards renewable scholarships to its students. This year’s NHFA scholarship award winners are Daniel E. Carrera, SOA’06, Elvira Carrizal, SOA’07, Merlany Fernandez, SOA’09, and Julian C. Pozzi, SOA’09.