

## Empire State Opioid Epidemic Innovation Challenge

September 28-30, 2018

Columbia University Fu Foundation School of Engineering and Applied Science



Raul Russi is the Chief Executive Officer of Acacia Network, Inc., the largest Puerto Rican-founded organization in the nation. Serving more than 170,000 people each year in the areas of Primary and Behavioral Healthcare, Economic Development, Housing, Education, and Cultural Arts. Acacia Network offers a unique array of fully integrated services throughout New York State, including New York City, Albany and Buffalo, as well as Florida, Tennessee, Maryland, and Puerto Rico. Acacia Network has annual revenues of \$327 million and \$386 million in assets.

Raul Russi was born on a farm in Patillas, Puerto Rico, the oldest son of 8 children. He moved with his family at the age of 11 to join his father who had migrated to Buffalo, NY during what is now recognized as the Puerto Rican Diaspora in the early 1950s.

After graduating from a vocational high school, Mr. Russi followed his father's path and joined the blue collar workforce in Buffalo. At the age of 26, after the unexpected death of his father, Mr. Russi assumed the role of sole breadwinner for the family. However, the blue-collar work force in Buffalo had nearly disappeared due to the closing of several manufacturing companies. Prompted by these pressures and the care-taking values instilled in him by his father, Mr. Russi decided to join the Police Department and became the first Latino police officer in Buffalo, NY. Mr. Russi quickly became one of the most highly decorated police officers in its history. He received numerous awards for arresting and convicting more violent offenders than any other officer, and for the implementation of recruitment initiatives to increase minority hiring.

Simultaneously, he was a ground breaking Latino activist who cared deeply for the Latino community and worked at the grassroots level. In 1973, with a group of Latino leaders, Mr. Russi created the Consortium of Spanish Speaking Organizations, the first full service agency headed by a Latino in Buffalo. He went on to found the Western New York Hispanic and Friends Civic Association, an activist organization responsible for the election of the first Hispanic judge outside of New York City. He incorporated and chaired the board of *La Alternativa*, Buffalo's first Latino-based substance abuse prevention program and merged five other small entities to create Buffalo's largest Hispanic Organization, *Hispanos Unidos de Buffalo*.

In 1980, he was awarded a Purple Heart by the Buffalo Police Department after being shot in the line of duty. Following this life-changing incident, he decided to fully commit himself to serve the Latino community.

In 1985, after the completion of his undergraduate studies, Mr. Russi left the force and his career skyrocketed. He became a member of the State Commission of Correction's Citizens Policy and Complaint Review Council; then, in 1986, Assistant Superintendent of the Erie County NY

Correctional Facility, and one year later was promoted to Superintendent. In 1989, he was appointed the Chairman and CEO of the Parole Board. After serving five years in Governor Mario Cuomo's Cabinet, Mr. Russi moved to New York City to become the first Latino Sheriff of the City of New York and the Probation Commissioner.

In 2002, Mr. Russi became the CEO of Basics, Inc, a multi-service agency in the South Bronx. He successfully expanded the scope of services from substance abuse treatment to include the provision of holistic, comprehensive healthcare, transitional housing to children and families, including transitional housing and social services to those experiencing the condition of homelessness. At that time, he understood the challenges of the non-profit sector and was inspired to look at new and innovative ways to preserve many Latino organizations that were experiencing difficulties due to the changing policy and funding environment.

In 2009, under his leadership and passion for positive strategic opportunities, Basics, Inc. assumed control over Promesa Systems, Inc., another health and human services organization in the South Bronx, and the dream of Acacia Network became a reality, along with its mission: to partner with communities, lead change, and promote healthy and prosperous individuals and families.

In 2011, Mr. Russi, who never forgot his Buffalo roots, aligned Acacia Network with *Hispanos Unidos de Buffalo* to address the growth of the Hispanic community in New York State's northern and western counties. Additionally, that same year, he established the *Capital District Latinos*, a community based not-for-profit organization that provides services to the Latino community of the Greater Capital District and other communities of color.

Today, through his vision, commitment, and leadership, the Network has preserved over sixty affiliate entities. His unique leadership style has injected a new energy into these organizations which has resulted in a dynamic and new non-profit management approach which has been proven to be highly successful and applauded by many stakeholders at the Federal, State, and City level.

Under Mr. Russi's leadership, Acacia Network performs with the highest degree of dedication based on proven values of *excellence, commitment, leadership, and customer service*. To this day, Mr. Russi continues to work tirelessly to ensure Puerto Ricans and Latinos receive premier health and human services, and he is truly dedicated to extending the organization's mission throughout the nation.

Mr. Russi believes that it is important for Latinos to have a "Seat at the table" and to work together as one "Latino Nation." His dream is to open doors to ensure that the next generation continues this important work to reinvest in our communities by bringing innovation, creativity, and most importantly, as he will say, "To get the job done!"

Raul Russi has four children and lives in Manhattan with his wife, Rody Reyes-Russi, his daughter Crystal and his youngest son, Joshua.