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# LATINAS *of the* YEAR

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13 INSPIRATIONAL  
WOMEN *of*

# 2013

If we learned anything this year, it's that Latina power is in full effect. From the media to the government, academia to entertainment, our women of the year are playing critical roles. They come from backgrounds as varied and rich as our culture, but they share a fighting spirit that seems to cry *pa'lante* with every move they make. Who are they? Read on, as we salute the *mujeres* who inspired us, moved us and wowed us in 2013.

BY WANDA MEDINA

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THE STORYTELLER

**SOLEDAD  
O'BRIEN**

Broadcast Journalist,  
Writer and Producer  
*Cuban American*, 47

When CNN canceled her hard-hitting morning news program earlier this year, Soledad O'Brien seized the opportunity to build an empire. In June, the award-winning Cuban American journalist launched Starfish Media Group, a production and distribution company that has since partnered with HBO Sports (she joined *Real Sports With Bryant Gumbel*), Al Jazeera America (where O'Brien is correspondent) and the network she called home for 10 years, CNN, for occasional specials. "There was this opportunity to focus on the stories I wanted to tell," says O'Brien, who was named a Harvard Graduate School of Education Distinguished Visiting Fellow for the 2013-14 academic year. "Many news organizations were going the opposite direction—lighter and fluffier. I was really interested in telling stories about communities that fly under the radar." O'Brien is now discussing a follow-up to her critically acclaimed documentary series *Latino in America*. This is what taking control of your own destiny looks like.



#### THE ACADEMIC

### CRISTINA RODRÍGUEZ

Professor of Law, Yale University  
Cuban and Puerto Rican, 40

As a high school student, Cristina Rodríguez was involved in an extracurricular activity that had a long-lasting effect on her: the debate team. It was this educational pastime that piqued her interest in government and politics. One of the nation's leading theorists on immigration law, Rodríguez made history in January by becoming the first Hispanic tenured professor in Yale Law School's nearly 200-year history. Rodríguez, who holds two degrees from Yale, was deeply affected by the honor. "The Yale Latino Law Students Association gave me their alumni achievement award, and to see how much it meant to people—especially students—was really powerful," says the San Antonio native. A Rhodes Scholar who clerked for former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, Rodríguez has been a high achiever throughout her career. And she has embraced her position with the responsibility it inherently brings: to be a role model to so many others.

#### THE LEADER

### MARIA TERESA KUMAR

President and CEO, Voto Latino  
Colombian, 39

Since its founding in 2004 by actress Rosario Dawson, Voto Latino has registered some 220,000 young voters and mobilized them to speak out and take action on policies impacting their lives. The organization's growth and influence have elevated its president and CEO, former political consultant Maria Teresa Kumar, who received a Hispanic Heritage Award in Leadership in September for her role in reaching millions of Latinos through online and mobile initiatives. "We need to make sure we're participating, because right now the policies that people are putting in place—whether it's defunding education, cutting veterans' benefits, cutting Social Security—are acting against our community because we're so young," Kumar says. Shortly before receiving the award, she addressed the crowd at the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington—a career highlight and a humbling experience, Kumar says, that almost left her speechless.



#### THE COACH

### SHAKIRA

Musician  
Colombian, 36

When the fourth season of NBC's *The Voice* premiered on March 25, audiences were treated to a softer, more approachable artist lending her talents to the high-pressure vocal competition: international superstar (and new mami of crazy-cute baby boy Milan) Shakira. The Grammy Award-winning singer was brought in to replace veteran coach Christina Aguilera, who took a hiatus after season three to pursue other musical projects. But Shakira didn't just bring a fresh perspective to the hit reality show. She also helped propel it to the top of the ratings, beating out *American Idol* for the first time ever. She attributed the show's success to the connection she shared with her fellow coaches. "I do feel that there is a special chemistry between us four," she told Oprah Winfrey recently. "We just have fun. I think that translates into the audience and it's very genuine. Whatever you see on TV, it's exactly what's happening."

**THE TRAILBLAZER****SONIA SOTOMAYOR**

Associate Justice of the  
United States Supreme Court  
Puerto Rican, 59

In June, the Supreme Court issued one of the most critical rulings in recent history when the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA)—a federal law that allowed states to refuse recognition of same-sex marriages that were legal in other states—was ruled unconstitutional. Sotomayor, the nation's first Hispanic Supreme Court justice, voted with the majority to strike down DOMA, paving the way for legally married same-sex couples to receive the same federal recognition and benefits as their heterosexual counterparts. The ruling was heralded as a historic victory for gay rights and demonstrated Sotomayor's commitment to civil rights and marriage equality.

**THE DISSIDENT****YOANI SÁNCHEZ**

Blogger  
Cuban, 38

Yoani Sánchez, who achieved worldwide recognition for openly criticizing the Cuban government on her blog Generación Y, finally stepped off the island in February after the government loosened its decades-long ban on travel outside the country. With her newly minted passport, Sánchez departed on a three-month world tour that included stops in the U.S., South America and Western Europe. The blogger, who in 2009 survived a beating at the hands of the Cuban government for speaking out against them, continued to speak candidly about the injustices facing her fellow Cubans and the everyday struggles she chronicles on her blog, which receives 10 million monthly page views. While she has been honored with several awards, it was the first time her peers were able to connect with her in person. "I've tried on 20 occasions to travel, every time I received an invitation," she told *The Washington Post*. "So this is a trip that I owe myself to be able to recoup a little bit of what was denied me by my government."

**THE HERO****VICTORIA SOTO**

Teacher  
Puerto Rican, 27

On Dec. 14, 2012, first-grade teacher Victoria Soto was shot and killed as she protected her students from a gunman rampaging through Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn. Soto's selfless act was a testament to the love she had for her profession and for her students. "Since she was three years old, Vicki wanted to be a teacher," says Carlee Soto, Victoria's sister. "It came as no surprise that Vicki died trying to shield her young students from the gunfire. She would have given anything for those kids." In January, a proposal to rename an elementary school after her in nearby Stratford, Conn., was unanimously approved, and in February, President Obama posthumously awarded her the Presidential Citizens Medal—the nation's second-highest civilian award. Although tragic, these honors recognize the passion that Victoria brought to the community and to education. Adds Carlee, "She loved teaching at Sandy Hook, and she loved her students more than anything."



**THE FIGHTER**

**RONDA ROUSEY**  
Athlete  
Venezuelan American, 26

Ronda Rousey isn't afraid to speak her mind. As a coach on the reality show *The Ultimate Fighter*, the mixed martial arts (MMA) star and Olympic bronze medalist throws verbal jabs as sharp as the blows she delivers in the octagon, where she's considered the best pound-for-pound female MMA fighter. In season 18, the show featured female coaches and athletes for the first time as they competed for an Ultimate Fighting Championship contract. For Rousey, the first woman to sign a contract with the UFC and the first woman to be crowned its champion, *The Ultimate Fighter* represented uncharted territory, and she entered it with unmistakable passion. "These kids that I'm responsible for have everything that is important in their lives on the line, and if that isn't something important to care about and cry about, then I don't know what is," she recently said about the show's contestants. "I have no filter with my emotions, and people are going to see exactly what I'm feeling."

**THE INNOVATOR**

**KATIA BEAUCHAMP**  
Cofounder and Co-Chief Executive, Birchbox  
Mexican American, 30

When she was a student at Harvard Business School, Katia Beauchamp, along with Hayley Barna, came up with an idea that would change her life forever. Barna had a beauty editor friend who often treated her to free samples—inspiring Beauchamp and Barna to create Birchbox, an e-commerce site that delivers monthly beauty samples to well over 400,000 subscribers, and then offers them the option to buy full-sized products. The business has taken off, with revenues jumping from \$5.5 million in 2011 to nearly \$40 million in 2013, according to the business publication *Crain's New York*. "We saw an opportunity to create a new way to discover and shop for beauty online," says Beauchamp. "We recognized that every woman dreamed of having the beauty editor best friend." At New York Fashion Week in September, Birchbox went from a virtual subscription delivery service to a live-action pop-up shop—a temporary installation where customers could book manicures and makeovers and sample products. The experience was such a hit, says Beauchamp, that she's considering expanding Birchbox's pop-up presence.

**THE EDUCATOR**

**JULIET GARCÍA**  
President, University of Texas at Brownsville  
Mexican American, 64

Few college presidents survive on staff as long as Juliet García, who has led the University of Texas at Brownsville for 21 years and gained national recognition for her service. During her tenure, she has expanded the university's student body (which is 93 percent Latino) to number nearly 10,000, and the operating budget has grown from \$31 million to \$145 million. To thrive as a college president requires "passion and focus and knowing that the long-term mission is what we seek," García says. "Students don't graduate in a quarter, a semester or a year." In 2013 the Texas legislature agreed to launch a new university that will combine UT Brownsville with the University of Texas–Pan American and add a new medical school. It takes persistence and support from the family to graduate from college, García says. Nonetheless, she emphasized, "There's a pent-up demand for education. People are anxious to achieve." —Gary Stern

**THE ADVOCATE****CRISTINA JADE PEÑA**

HIV/AIDS Activist

Mexican American, 29

In 1993, Cristina Jade Peña learned that she had been born HIV positive. Although she was only 9, she knew how she wanted to respond: by becoming an activist. Peña's mom kept her daughter's status private in her Los Angeles neighborhood, but encouraged her to speak out in nearby communities. "I had the chance to really share my story and learn what it meant to be an educator at a young age," Peña says, "but I still had the safety of being normal. I could still be Cristina when I went back to school." Today, Peña works with global AIDS organizations like the Elizabeth Glaser Pediatric AIDS Foundation and Keep a Child Alive. In April, she became one of the faces of Alicia Keys's new HIV awareness campaign, Empowered, and is featured in the campaign's signature video, telling her story as fearlessly as she did when she was 9.

**THE GURU****DULCE CANDY TEJEDA**

Fashion and Beauty Vlogger

Mexican American, 26

Before she became a YouTube sensation, Dulce Candy Tejeda wasn't all about flaunting her femininity. As a soldier in Iraq, she was in army fatigues and combat boots round the clock—no Lancôme powder palettes or Enzo Angiolini stilettos for her. And when Tejeda's tour ended in 2008, she landed a job as a mechanic—not the usual apprenticeship for a beauty guru in training. But after hours, her true persona would emerge when she would turn on the camera and talk to a growing online audience about all things girly. Tejeda's approachable style has attracted 1.3 million subscribers to her YouTube channel and hordes of visitors to dulcecadny.com, and has launched her as a style icon. In September, Macy's announced that it will partner with her to create online promotional videos—the first time the retail giant has worked with outside vloggers to highlight its beauty and style products. For Tejeda, this is the icing on the cake. "I've always enjoyed [Macy's] collections," she says. "Being able to go into their stores and pull pieces that really align with my sense of style has been a dream come true."

**THE GENIUS****ANA MARIA REY**

Theoretical Physicist

Colombian, 36

As a young girl growing up in Bogotá, Colombia, Ana Maria Rey knew she wanted to be a physicist. What she didn't know was that she would grow up to become an atomic physicist who would be awarded one of the most coveted prizes in cultural history. In September, Rey received a MacArthur Fellowship—known to many as the genius grant. Handed out annually, the MacArthur grant is awarded—along with a \$625,000 stipend—to 20 to 30 exceptional individuals from a variety of backgrounds who are doing extraordinary work in their respective fields. For Rey, the fellowship isn't just a professional honor, it's a personal one, too. "It means a lot because it's a recognition of my work," she says. "I've worked very hard, so to see it recognized in that way is fantastic. It's a great honor for my field, as a woman and as someone from Latin America."

