



Power & Performance

How Cecilia Ochoa Levine Went
From Seamstress to
Textile Mogul

By Georgina Hernandez-Escobar

There are no borders for entrepreneurship, particularly in an area as rich in cultural diversity as our own. Any business that wants to place its roots here has to turn the challenge of appealing to several different marketplaces and aesthetics into an opportunity. This capability is one of the key ingredients to success for El Pasoan Cecilia Ochoa Levine.

Ochoa Levine and her company, MFI international, have a simple motto: "Our ambition is your success." With over 70,000 employees in Mexico, a purchasing office in Taiwan, two plants in China and the MFI Corporate Office in El Paso, her company has crossed borders socially, economically and culturally. Ochoa Levine's public influence on bi-cultural issues as well as her international business have had considerable influence in El Paso growth and international integration. Such a woman not only proves that ambition determines success, but also with her struggles on the road to achievement, reinforces the idea that one person can make a difference, using the fantastic opportunities that our bi-cultural region offers.

Cecilia Ochoa Levine (in one of her local manufacturing facilities) has proven that ambition determines success and that El Paso's diversity is not a hindrance, but a key to its ascendancy.



Photographs by Abraham E. Ibañez

The recipe to her success includes ingredients such as passion, perseverance and ambition. But underneath the layer of professionalism lies an even richer area that transforms this business icon into a complex and admirable El Pasoan.

We met in a room infused with the aromas of fresh coffee, mixed with wine cork and aged mahogany—an appropriate ambiance to receive a woman of such elegance.

Born in Delicias, Chihuahua, Ochoa Levine attended Loreto Academy and later graduated from UTEP with a degree in Geology. While living in Midland, TX and at a loose end—as it were—she sewed various garments and displayed them at different arts and crafts fairs.

"I was thirty-five years old, a single mother with three kids when I started in this business," began Ochoa Levine. Not expecting her small business to produce much beyond a very modest return, she was dumbfounded when companies began contacting her and asking her for designs. Her company, Worlds of Wonder, which started with two sewing machines, expanded to include 267 machines within an astonishing two years, and Levine soon found herself subcontracting for companies such as Kimberly Clark, Evenflow, Playskool and Sara Lee.

And her accomplishments don't even come close to ending there. Ongoing success has seen her lecture Business students at Baylor University, finds her often in Washington, where she serves at the President's Exports Council (one of only two women on the 28-member panel) and has prompted her to found an organization as part of the U.S.-Mexico Strategic Alliance, whose goal is to collect medical equipment to send to Mexican hospitals.

As is true in most stories of success, the beginning is always hard, the end usually happy, but it is the middle that tells the story. In this case, the middle is a tale of motherhood and the power of a woman in the marketplace of ideas, a passion in part inspired by her grandmother, Emma Wilson-Bunsow.

"She was fabulous. She was one of the founders of Delicias and founder of Hotel Del Norte which is still there and managed by my uncle," she said, smiling. "My grandmother taught me there was nothing that would stop a woman from being treated with respect and getting to the top."

Ochoa Levine showed an even warmer side when speaking of the difficulties of being a single mother of three when she began her business. "Being a single mom, you're thrown into a different type of motherhood, where one has to trust that the child will become a responsible individual, learning from example." An example of this was a memory of her son at a young age selling pillows that he made to the women of Ochoa Levine's plant. "He was a young entrepreneur," she said with a chuckle.

As might be imagined, Ochoa Levine's life as a mother was far from typical. Making her children grow accustomed to the plant-school-plant-homework lifestyle was an ideal way for this mother to merge mothering with her business life, which in turn made her children develop good managing skills. "It was important that they knew that," she said in a very familiar, disciplinary tone.

It's hard to believe that a woman who has her corporate office here in El Paso (as well as two manufacturing facilities), one plant in Juarez, an office in Taiwan and two more plants in China started off at the age of thirty-five attempting to close contracts with her children, literally, at her side. Her children never became an obstacle for her, though. In fact, they became her strength—and this fierce entrepreneur didn't stop there. In 1989 she met Lance Levine.

"I took away a contract from my now husband, that is where I met him," Ochoa Levine laughed.

In a unique position to comment on globalization issues, Ochoa Levine sees the struggles in international competition as a potential advantage, rather than the anchor on the American economy it is often regarded as.

"We will be faced with competing with India, China and Vietnam, but our [El Paso] multi-cultural community gives us an opportunity to deal globally. This community in particular and our country in general has always made great success of its multi-culturalism...it's adaptability. We need to accentuate the strengths in our marketplaces, not our deficits."

When asked how she would like to be remembered, Ochoa Levine responded simply. "I would like to be remembered as one of the people that promoted the fact that we are stronger as a bi-national region...and of course as a good mother and wife."

Ochoa Levine holds it true that everything we do sets an example. Be it the eager business students at UTEP she lectures or the many workers who seek inspiration from her, her children and grandchildren; Cecilia Ochoa Levine is a gift to this generation...and generations to come. 

