

Nurturing exchange

By John Highfield

WHEN Marina Larios left her native Mexico City for a new life in Sheffield 12 years ago, she agrees there were some stereotypes she needed to overcome.

"I parked the donkey and left the sombrero outside and came with my backpack full of dreams to study at Sheffield Hallam University," she recalls.

She had already completed an education in Mexico, had a degree in business and marketing and had studied for her PhD in America before deciding to extend her studies in Europe, originally intending to head for the historic Italian city of Bologna before realising that the Masters degree she was most interested in was available in South Yorkshire.

"When people saw The Full Monty in Mexico, that's what they thought of Sheffield," she says - though, 12 years after making it her home, she is now quick to spring to the city's defence and can credit it with providing her first business success.

She does concede that if the people of Sheffield perhaps had some cliched ideas about her home country then she too had a fairly distorted image of what South Yorkshire would be like, thanks mainly to The Full Monty.

"When people saw The Full Monty in Mexico, that's what they thought of Sheffield," she says - though, 12 years after making it her home, she is now quick to spring to the city's defence and can credit it with providing her first business success.

For realising that Sheffield could provide some excellent educational opportunities for fellow Mexican students, Marina decided there should be a link between the two countries and, out of that idea, came Intercambio.

"Intercambio means exchange," she explains. "We are an agent for all the colleges and universities in Sheffield, to help bring over Mexicans to study for Masters and PhDs and English programmes.

"The idea is to nurture the students when they are coming over.



"We have an office in Mexico where we have all the information on what it means to stay in the UK and in a city like this. I know how it felt 12 years ago so I really relate to them and they relate to me because, of course, I am Mexican."

Intercambio is not, however, just about providing information - it's also about actively encouraging links between the two countries through great student contact.

"International students are the best ambassadors for Sheffield," Marina points out, highlighting the fact that after three years of productive and enjoyable study, those students then take the message with them that the city is among the leaders for international study.

Her enthusiasm for South Yorkshire is clear as she insists: "I do believe that Sheffield has become my home - in Sheffield I have grown, Sheffield has been my springboard to a very high international level."

And it was in Sheffield that she launched her other business idea, the Inova Consultancy, the organisation which provides a range of services for women returning to employment or self-employment, including mentoring circles, coaching and

mentoring sessions, career development workshops and personality profiling.

It's a concept that combines two clear passions - Marina's loyalty to Sheffield and her interest in providing greater business opportunities for women.

"Being a woman in Mexico meant very different opportunities to those I had in the UK," she points out. "In Mexico, the first question is always: 'What's your name?' and the second is: 'How many children do you have?'"

"When I came to Sheffield I realised that equal opportunities meant in Europe. I felt very privileged being a Mexican and being here and I felt I needed to give something back, which is what I have done with Inova."

Marina is also the President of WITEC (European Association for Women in Science, Engineering and Technology) which is based in 10 countries across Europe and has been successfully working towards the promotion of and support for women in science, engineering and technology for the last 20 years.

She has been a speaker at various international conferences presenting positive actions to

increase the representation of women in SET, including presentations at the United Nations in New York.

She is currently an advisor for the Cambridge Centre of Gender Studies, a consultant expert in European project management and evaluator of national and EU initiatives.

In addition she is a former Trustee of the South Yorkshire Women's Development Trust and Co-Director of MEXWII-Mexican Women Inventors and Innovators.

And she is more than happy to point out that much of this has happened because she made that early decision to settle in Sheffield rather than head for Bologna.

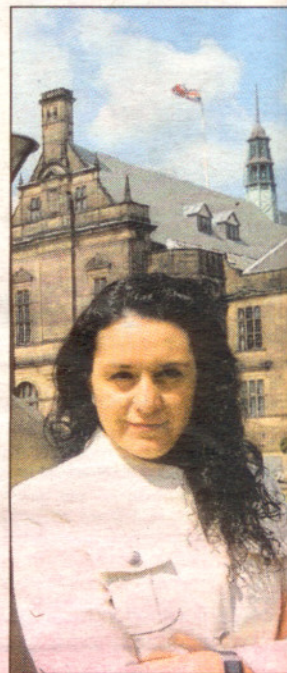
"I have taken the name of Sheffield to the United Nations - I have been a speaker there twice - and I am the president of an organisation and when people see my address they see that it is Sheffield," she says.

"It has been the place where I have developed and I am personally very grateful to the city, which I do believe is such a warm place and people are so friendly that you never feel like a stranger - I have always felt that I belonged here!"

Mexican born
Marina loves
Sheffield

Marina Larios, director of Inova Consultancy

Photos: Dennis Lound



email: fiona'firth@sheffieldnewspapers.co.uk