

Murano Becomes First Hispanic, First Woman To Lead A&M

By Stephanie Jeter '06

BREAKING BARRIERS

On Jan. 3, Dr. Elsa Murano became the first woman and the first Hispanic-American to be named president of Texas A&M University.

A few years earlier, she was first to break the same barriers with her appointment as dean and vice chancellor of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. Before that, Murano was the first Hispanic-American to serve as undersecretary for food safety with the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Three times Murano has achieved what none have done. It makes one wonder, what else is our university president capable of?

Shortly before her final approval as president, the agricultural trailblazer invited the *Texas Aggie* to her office for one of her final interviews as a dean and vice chancellor. While sharing stories of her first visit to Aggieland and memories of her time in Washington, D.C., A&M's new president offered her vision and ideas for the university she loves.

All her accolades, appointments and merits—file them away. They're only peeks at what proves Murano's ability to improve and sustain, because, as she explained, her greatest tool is ever-living, ever-loving passion.

PHOTO BY JIM LYLE



Murano brings something unique to the presidency. She's done it all before. Murano has been the student, the graduate student, the professor and the professional. After earning her doctorate in food science and technology from Virginia Tech State University, Murano quickly became known for her work in food safety. She was winning grants and researching big topics. She was being noticed. So much that after she was recruited by Texas A&M to teach in the Department of Animal Science, the Bush administration offered her a leadership gig, appointing her undersecretary for food safety for USDA.



The position made her the highest ranking food safety official in U.S. government. The safety of every hamburger, every hardboiled egg, every chicken-salad mix on a cracker eaten in America was on her shoulders. She traveled. She spoke. "I represented the U.S. government's position at international meetings where standards for food safety were established," Murano said.

She had 10,000 employees scattered across the country under her administration, and she excelled. Though bioterrorism was becoming a greater threat, the amount of food recalled by the USDA declined.

She even handled a budget nearing \$1 billion.



LEFT: Before former A&M President Dr. Robert Gates left his post to serve as U.S. Secretary of Defense, he and Dr. Murano worked jointly to improve the undergraduate student experience. Commissioned by Gates, Dr. Murano's aptly named "Murano Report" continues to make strides to enhance the educational experiences of current students.

THIS IMAGE: Pictured in the Clayton W. Williams, Jr. Alumni Center, Murano said she looks forward to meeting more former students in her new position as president. She's a fan of A&M sports, so look for her in the stands.



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When speaking about the future of Texas A&M, Murano often mentions ideas her predecessor, Dr. Robert Gates, initiated before he left to serve as U.S. secretary of defense. In a way, the two are similar. Both had governmental experience at managing a complex organization—Gate's was the CIA; he spoke often of the well-made match between school and country.

Murano remembers the first time she met him. "The USDA had some programs that they run here," she said. Gates had just started his tenure as university president, "so I paid him a courtesy visit. I remember telling him during that visit that Texas A&M University needed to step up their presence in Washington, D.C.," Murano said. Gates agreed, calling Texas A&M one of the "best kept secrets" in education.

The conversation resonated with Murano. When Gates asked her to head up the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences and its related state agencies in 2005, she rolled up her sleeves with the goal of making that "best kept secret" common knowledge.

Through her leadership, the college increased its undergraduate enrollment and its reputation. She joined with administrators and professors to broaden the college's perceived boundaries and started a strategic planning process. It continues even now, gaining speed with its recent achievements.

The program and its triumph is the reason she wasn't initially interested in leaving her post as dean and vice chancellor, even if it was for the presidency.

THE PHONE RANG

several times before she answered it. As vice chancellor and dean of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Murano wasn't expecting the message her assistant delivered. She was in Minneapolis on business when "I had to call the chairman of the Board of Regents," Murano said.

The passed note was a request. The search committee respon-

sible for finding qualified applicants for Texas A&M University's president wanted to consider Murano; they asked if she was interested in the job.

She hadn't applied for the position, but her legacy of successes drew the attention of selection committee. She had worked with the Board of Regents before. Unlike other deans, Murano was considered a CEO due to her position over the state agencies: AgriLife Extension, Texas AgriLife Research, Texas Forest Service and the Texas Veterinary Medicals Diagnostic Lab. When Gates was president, he knew she could get things done. Once, after a task force commissioned by Gates returned 88 recommendations to enhance the undergraduate experience, "He called me into his office and plopped that big book down on his table," Murano said. It became her job to unite a committee and trim the list to the essentials.

When it came time to give the search committee her decision, Murano decided she wanted to see it through. She started thinking about the perspective she had on where the university needed to go. "Then of course what started really working on me is this notion of being the first woman, the first Hispanic president," she said. "I don't pursue careers to be the first, but it started to dawn on me." If Murano accepted, she would be the first. She considered what it would mean for the university and its goal to increase diversity. She thought about the

**ELSA MURANO'S
TO-DO LIST**

"The picture is becoming pretty clear, and it all boils down to continuing the legacy that (former University President Robert) Gates set for us. But there are things that are associated with that that need to be done."

- Improve facilities and classrooms.
- Provide increased support for graduate students.
- Increase diversity in the student and faculty population.
- Keep the cost of tuition low.
- Enhance learning experiences for students by increasing study abroad opportunities.
- Continue high standards for research and teaching.

individuals who would be affected.

“Just today I got an e-mail from a student in economics,” Murano said. “I don’t know her. She’s a Hispanic girl who was telling me that it’s been hard. College is not easy and she’s had moments where she’s thought, ‘Is this worth it?’” The girl questioned whether she’d make it past barriers known for knocking others on their faces. “She said that when she learned of my possibly being appointed, it made a huge difference. ... She sees now that anything is possible.”

MURANO HAS LONG BEEN

tagged as an encourager, a listener and a woman of great focus. In her office, she displays mementos and honors that explain her even more. Murano moves about her space like a collector. Memories are displayed on the walls, in frames or—like the figurine of a flatfooted pig—nestled in a ceiling-high display cabinet. Every item tells: commendations prove her impressive agricultural background; a series of brightly colored posters give nod to her Cuban roots. And in photographs, she is always smiling. In one shot, Murano is probably 4 years old, wearing a light-colored frilly dress. Pressed against her mother’s thigh, she’s holding a pair of maracas.

The photo’s resolution is grainy but the story behind it has kept its shine. The photo was taken as Murano’s family fled Cuba. They left shortly after Fidel Castro’s communist revolution.

Her story is the classic American success story. It’s a story to tell again. Not only as an encouragement, but as a means



of understanding Texas A&M.

Mainly because Murano is a passionate Texas Aggie.

IT WAS IN THE SHUFFLED

silence of Silver Taps that Murano first grasped the spirit of Texas A&M University.

It was 1995, and she along with her husband, Peter, had just accepted individual positions as professors at A&M.

They were new to Texas, but both had an improvised idea of what life in the new state would be like. Husband Peter “had grown up with the Davy Crockett craze of the 1950s,” she said. Twirling pistols on trigger fingers, hats tipped as a greeting and spurs—he may have imagined living next door to John Wayne. And after their first visit to the Alamo, “Wow,” Dr. Murano said. “He immediately wanted to move here.”

Welcome to Texas.

She returned its greeting. Moving from Iowa to College Station, the

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AT A GLANCE

1961
In 1961, Elsa Murano’s family left Cuba.



1981
She attended Florida International University, starting her academic career in 1981 as a research laboratory technician. She earned her bachelor’s degree in biological sciences.

1987 & 1990
She earned her master’s degree in anaerobic microbiology, and a doctorate in food science and technology from Virginia Tech State University.

1990
From 1990–95, Murano was an assistant professor in the Department of Microbiology, Immunology and Preventive Medicine at Iowa State University.



LEFT: While meeting with Porter Garner III '79, The Association's Executive Director, Murano explained the respect she has for former students. She said it takes everyone to preserve A&M's tradition of excellence. Former students are ambassadors for Texas A&M around the world. **THIS IMAGE:** Murano with senior cadets at the Alamo Bowl in San Antonio.

Murano family “didn’t have to think about it in the least,” she said.

Yet College Station wasn’t without its peculiarities. They were introduced to the Aggie family almost immediately— and in its entirety. The guided tours from their College Station hosts were jaunts through tradition. They rolled through Muster, Elephant Walk, the Aggie Ring, through the Corps of Cadets and the Aggie Band. She says now, looking back, her first response was one of intrigue. “But when we started working here as faculty and saw the students so respectful,” she said, her voice gaining speed with each revelation. When she understood “howdy” and started “learning about the various traditions and the reasons for the traditions, it really starts to make an impression on you.”

Unlike the other tours she’d followed as a new faculty member, there was no accompanying explanation that Tuesday night as the clock struck 10:30 for Silver Taps. No one talked as she heard the inaudible call of hundreds joining under the Spirit of Aggieland.

She wants what’s best for the university, she said. She wants what’s best for students and faculty. She says she’s prepared to unite groups to “roll up our sleeves” and make Texas A&M better than it has ever been before.

She’s done it before, led a group to new heights. It’s tradition. 🍷

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1995

She was recruited to Texas A&M University in 1995 as an associate professor in Department of Animal Science. Her positions also included director and associate director of the Center for Food Safety.

2001

In 2001, Murano was appointed by President Bush as the first Hispanic-American to serve as undersecretary for food safety at the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The position made her the highest-ranking food safety official in U.S. government.

2002

In 2002 she was named one of the “100 Most Influential Hispanics” by *Hispanic Business Magazine*.

2005

In 2005, she accepted former Texas A&M President Dr. Robert Gate’s invitation to come back to Texas A&M as the vice chancellor and dean of agriculture and life sciences. Murano was the first woman and first Hispanic-American to fill the role.

2008

In 2008 she became the first woman and first Hispanic-American to lead Texas A&M University.

FAMILY

Murano is married to Peter Murano, who directs Texas A&M’s Center for Obesity Research and Program Evaluation. He’s also an associate professor of nutrition and food science. The two met while Murano was studying in Florida.