

## **About the Recipients: Dick and Myrta's Big Adventure**

by Donald Lash, Executive Director, Sinergia

Dick Lash was born in Buffalo, New York, and spent his childhood shoveling snow, playing baseball and developing an iconoclastic sense of humor. In college, he continued to play ball, and was purportedly scouted by the Brooklyn Dodgers, but chose physical therapy as a career. When he entered the profession, physical therapy was focused on the rehabilitation of World War II veterans and people who has suffered polio in childhood. More than a decade before the closure of the infamous Willowbrook, New York's most notorious institution for the custody and alleged care of people with developmental disabilities, he became the first director of a school for students with disabilities on Long Island. Dick was one of the pioneers who demonstrated the righteousness and efficacy of the public policy initiatives enshrined in Section 504, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Myrta Cuadra was born in Puerto Rico, and had no opportunity to shovel snow until her parents brought her as a young girl to El Barrio, the heart of New York City's Puerto Rican community in East Harlem. Her tenacity and ability to squeeze positive outcomes out of controlled chaos emerged when Myrta helped to organize a program for Latino students at the State University of New York.

Dick and Myrta joined forces in the mid-'70s, and together they envisioned what became Sinergia, Inc. Meaning "synergy" in Spanish, Sinergia was conceived as a bridge between primarily low-income Latino and African-American families and the service system which had developed to meet the needs of the white middle-class. In addition to struggling to create opportunity for a child with a disability, many of these families had to deal with homelessness, joblessness, language barriers and discrimination. In addition to striving to create culturally and linguistically appropriate services, Sinergia pioneered services to people who were previously not taken into account, such as homeless families with a developmentally disabled member, parents with a developmental disability who chose to live with their children, and people who rebelled at the monotony of sheltered workshops and traditional day programs.

Sinergia began as a shoestring operation and moved from free space in a school to a converted two-bedroom apartment to the basement of an apartment building to prestigious space in midtown Manhattan. It has never lost its focus as an agency which exists to ensure that the benefits of education and services are extended to people who are traditionally left out. Dick and Myrta acted out their belief that people with disabilities are an asset to their community, of which they are entitled to become independent, respected members, and that this is

the case regardless of the demographic or economic characteristics of that community. Along the way, of course when no one was looking, they stole away and got married.

Dick and Myrta have been honored – individually, together and on behalf of Sinergia – at least two dozen times, by the Mayor of New York City, the New York State Developmental Disabilities Planning Council, United Cerebral Palsy, the Governor of New York State, the New York City Department of Homeless Services, the New York State Office of Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities and countless others. Whether this is because of or despite the fact that they made a career of trading off “good cop, bad cop” roles in advocating on behalf of all people with disabilities and their families is a matter of conjecture.

Between them, Myrta and Dick have eleven children, fourteen grandchildren and one great grandchild, all of whom have guided tours of Puerto Rico readily available.