

# From immigrant family to tech CEO, Nina Vaca uses her success to spread global entrepreneurship

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The first time you hear about Nina Vaca, you wonder why you've never heard of her before.

At 46, this married mother of four owns a billion-dollar-plus tech staffing company, competes in triathlons for charity and supports STEM education efforts while uplifting the aspirations of women and minorities.

"I've been blessed many times to be the first, the youngest or the only," says Vaca, founder and CEO of Dallas-based Pinnacle Group and a director of three major public corporations. "I look around the boardroom, and I don't see others who look like me. Changing that is a focal point in my life.

"I call it a three-legged stool: my family first, my business and my community."

Vaca is well-known in some circles - she was pictured on a recent cover of Latino Leaders magazine, featuring the 101 most influential Hispanics in America.

But Nina Vaca is hardly a household name.

That's changing.

In 2014, President Barack Obama appointed Vaca as a presidential ambassador of global entrepreneurship. In this capacity, she has traveled to five continents, representing the White House and the Department of Commerce in an entrepreneurship crusade.

She was recently in Jordan for three jumpacked days as the guest of the U.S. Embassy, spreading the gospel to government agencies, women's groups and the next generation of entrepreneurs in the Middle East.

She's living the lofty name of her company that she picked to inspire her in 1996, when she founded Pinnacle on the living room floor of her Dallas apartment with \$300 business check and a Dell Computer.

"I started literally making cold calls on corporations and businesses in Dallas, Texas, offering to provide them with IT talent," Vaca recalls. "I had a purpose, a computer and an attitude. I told myself: 'I can do this.'"

And she has.

Since 2012, Pinnacle Group, which offers tech workforce solutions, mostly to large corporations, has more than quadrupled its revenue, blowing past the billion-dollar mark last year.

Pinnacle has topped or placed second on the 50 fastest-growing women-owned/led companies list compiled by the Women Presidents' Organization in conjunction with American Express in each of the last three years

Vaca figures Pinnacle has a shot at No. 1 again because she expects revenue to balloon to \$1.6 billion this year.

And that doesn't take into account a megadeal with MetLife that was inked in August. Beginning next year, Pinnacle will manage the

insurance icon's spending on technology services.

"It was clear that (Pinnacle) could adapt to any business climate and overcome complex problems," says Michael Schiappa, vice president of global procurement for MetLife.

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The lobby and hallways of Pinnacle headquarters on LBJ Freeway are a gallery of recognitions.

"Awards are a symbol of what we've done," Vaca says, passing a plaque proclaiming Pinnacle as AT&T's supplier of the year in 2016. "But they're not a symbol of who we are."

So "who" is Pinnacle?

"We're much like the Southwest Airlines of our industry," she says. "We're nimble, flexible, entrepreneurial and really, really good at what we do. We're turning heads with the caliber of clients we're winning."

So who is Nina Vaca?

Vaca is an immigrant by a twist of fate.

Her parents, Amanda and Alfredo Vaca, emigrated from Quito, Ecuador, to California in the '60s. As the middle of five kids, the other four of whom were born in Los Angeles, Nina should have been born in the U.S.

But Amanda, a civic activist who fought for U.S. rights of Ecuadoreans, was on a trip to her homeland when Nina "just came out" on April Fools' Day 1971.

Her entrepreneurial parents put their children's education first, moving to neighborhoods in the San Fernando Valley that they couldn't afford so the kids could attend better schools.

"No matter where it was, I'd wake up at the crack of dawn and take the rapid transit to school," Vaca says. "It was hard and a lot of work, but it taught me a lot about life: If I wanted that good education, I'd be at the transit station at 5:30 in the morning.

"Today, I have an incredible work ethic."

Her father, who owned a travel agency, was murdered in 1989, when Nina was 17.

"My dad died at 46. My age exactly. And he left behind five children," Vaca says. "It was a tragic time for my family. That's what makes our success story so beautiful.

"Yes, like a good entrepreneur, I found a need in the marketplace and a way to fill it. Yes, the barriers to entry were minimal at the time because there was so much demand for IT. Yes, all those things are true.

"But the real purpose behind me starting Pinnacle was to create a better life and a better circumstance for my family."

Her older sister, Jessica Narvaez, joined Pinnacle's management team early on, followed by her younger brother, Freddy Vaca, then her husband, Jim Humrichouse, and cousin, Ximena Alvarez.

Today, Vaca numbers her "family" in the thousands, including 5,000 employees and consultants and people in the communities here and abroad that she helps.

"The larger and more successful we are at Pinnacle, the more we're able to give back in a material way," Vaca says. "It's part of our DNA."

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So how did Nina come to be a transplanted Texan?

After Alfredo's murder, Nina's maternal grandmother became ill with a heart condition. Amanda took her to Houston for treatment.

"That's how my mother discovered this place called Texas," says Nina, who stayed in California to sell her father's travel agency. "This was 1989. The price of oil was very low. People were walking away from their homes. She had this vision that our family could create a better life here in Texas."

Nina begged her mother to go to college. "She said, 'You can go to college as long as you stay close to home.' "

Nina enrolled in Southwest Texas State (now Texas State) University in San Marcos.

"LA girl dropped in a tiny little college town," she says. "I didn't know a soul there, and very few people looked like me. But I've been a risk-taker all my life.

"Fast-forward, today, I'm proud to have an endowment in my name there at that small but mighty university."

Vaca was named a distinguished alumna in 2012 - the youngest in university history - a distinction she shares with former President Lyndon Baines Johnson.

As a 25-year-old, she launched Pinnacle in October 1996, bringing in \$30,000 by year's end.

"Everything was going great from '96 to 2001," she recalls. "I got married in 1999. Had my first millennial baby in 2000. I had my second baby girl two days after 9/11."

The terrorist attacks sent her industry and her company into a deep chasm.

Vaca dug in, used her life savings, mortgaged her home and hired IT talent that others had let go.

"We came out of that recession kicking," she says.

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Verizon and AT&T gave Vaca her first big boosts in late 2001.

In 2007, EDS signed a \$160 million contract with Pinnacle, which was generating only about \$40 million in annual revenue at the time. "It was the proverbial whale that took us into 45 states," she says.

Comcast came on board nearly four years ago. Pinnacle manages the telecom giant's contingent IT labor force and hundreds of tech suppliers throughout its organization.

"Comcast gave us an opportunity to do something extremely strategic and big," she says. "But what they really did was give women-owned businesses hope."

And MetLife just entered the big picture.

"Pinnacle keeps kicking butt," says Vaca, who stands all of 5 feet.

Kneeland Youngblood, one of the nation's most successful private equity managers, has mentored Vaca for more than a decade, having spotted a bit of his younger self in her.

"What I saw in Nina was a woman who was bright, driven, with a track record of success who wanted to achieve even more," says the black 61-year-old founding partner of Dallas-based Pharos Capital Group LLC. "She listens and she acts."

For example, Youngblood encouraged Vaca to seek corporate board positions and gave her names of headhunters who could help.

"Soon enough, she was on the boards of Comerica, Kohl's and Cinemark," he says. "It's enhanced not only her visibility but also has given her insight into how Fortune 500 companies operate, and how she can inculcate that type of knowledge and experience within her own organization."

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Vaca, who became naturalized when she was in her 20s, views U.S. citizenship as a blessing and not a given, believes that failure is never an option and that give-back is an abject responsibility.

Amanda, who at 71 is retired in Houston, says her daughter was a good pupil.

"Despite all the success she has had - within her career and her life overall - she has continued to be the daughter I raised," Amanda says. "She is proud of her roots. She does not forget where she comes from and is very cognizant of what family means and what it means to help."

This year, Pinnacle adopted Thomas Jefferson High School as part of the Collegiate Academies program offered by the Dallas Independent School District and the Dallas County Community College District. High school students have the opportunity to graduate with a diploma and an associate college degree in applied science. Tuition, fees, books and transportation to the colleges are free.

"These are students who are first-generation college attendees," Vaca says. "By pumping out hundreds of minority students in STEM, we're changing the face of the workforce of Dallas forever."

In July, Vaca competed in the Ironman 70.3 in Manta, Ecuador. She raised \$117,000 through GoFundMe and a \$60,000 match from Cinemark to complete the "Villa de la Alegria" (Village of Happiness). It's a 40-unit housing development that she's building in partnership with the local Rotary Club in Quito for families left homeless by last year's massive earthquake.

She swam 1.2 miles in the Pacific Ocean, biked for 56 miles and ran a half marathon (13.1 miles) - the last 10 miles with an injured leg.

"It was a beat-down. But I finished," she says. "Once I put my head to something, failure is not an option."

She's going back to Ecuador in late November, when the houses should be finished.

She also allows herself a little frivolity.

Six years ago, Vaca snagged the specialty COWBOYS license plates - good until 2036 - by bidding \$11,500 at an auction at Cowboys Stadium. She displays them proudly on her Cowboys-blue Mercedes.



And she tries to keep business at bay whenever she can.

"For someone who is as scheduled as I am, my favorite plans are no plans - just hanging out with my family," she says.

Every Dec. 31, Vaca jots down her goals and seals them in an envelope.

"I look at it the following year and see how well I followed my plan," she says. "My goal is to smell the roses a little bit more."

How's that working out?

Her answer is a laugh.

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Nina Vaca

Title: Founder, chairman and CEO of Pinnacle Group

Age: 46

Born: Quito, Ecuador

Grew up: Los Angeles

Resides: Dallas

Education: Bachelor of arts in speech communications, minor in business administration, Texas State University, 1994

Boards of directors: Comerica, Kohl's Corp. and Cinemark Holdings.

Personal: Married to Jim Humrichouse for 18 years. They have two daughters, 17 and 15, and two sons, 12 and 11.

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Pinnacle Group

Founded: 1996

Headquarters: Dallas

Ownership: Nina Vaca

Annual revenue: \$1.6 billion forecast for 2017

Employees: 200 at headquarters and 4,500 to 5,000 contractor consultants

SOURCE: Nina Vaca

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