

audience. This is something the company continued to do, even though it takes a lot of production because it's important to its audience to have access to the service. "We knew it was a dark time," she says, "and people needed that."

The type of content offered also changed as schools began going remote. "Our audience was declared essential workers," she says.

So, Solmart Media developed content that would help parents understand what was going on and brought in experts to reach the younger, still-in-school audience.

As soon as stay-at-home came about, Soler was on it. She created the weekly program *Nuestros Niños*, or *Our Children*. After speaking with friend Geri Chaffee for an interview about homeschooling, the program took off. Now, in partnership with the Dreamers Academy, a dual-language charter school in Sarasota Chaffee founded, the pair record interviews from various experts to help parents and students of their audience.

The podcast is still being

produced and continues to be an instrumental teaching platform many districts have begun using, she says.

A DREAM COME TRUE

Since changing the strategy, the audience has continued to expand — evidenced by the growth in advertisement sales. Reflecting on the recent success, Soler credits the roots of her career at Loyola University Chicago. "We attended a university that teaches you to give back," she says. "We were able to make changes by providing hope, information, companionship, entertainment and a friendly voice."

Since 2019, the company has been based in Sarasota. The reach that Solmart Media has now extends from St. Petersburg down to north Fort Myers, across nine counties.

A friend of the couple reached out about a year-long course in leadership training with the National Association of Broadcasters in 2013 before they took the plunge into their own radio business. Since Martínez's career was centered around radio,

Soler pushed him to pursue it. A lesson learned throughout the course was to seek out smaller markets to build up. And that's exactly what they did.

"We started looking for stations," Soler says. They kept the search to Florida, outside of the large markets, and ended up starting in Zolfo Springs and Arcadia, in Hardee and DeSoto counties, respectively. In 2014, the pair purchased two stations previously owned by Heartland Broadcasting: WZSP-FM and WZZS-FM.

The couple did extensive research into those counties to determine what type of radio shows would be successful. They found the younger audience spans from 18 to 25 and the mature audience is 25 to 35.

The goal of the research? "To offer something no one else is offering," Soler says, in addition to creating a Gulf Coast Spanish media network. The challenge was not taking the census count to heart.

Soler says the number of Hispanic people in their coverage area is much higher than what's noted on the census. "We knew the numbers were there," she says. "After that, it's just knowing our audience."

Then around four years ago, the business duo petitioned the FCC for a license on the FM frequency for a new dial number for the WTMV station. They were given 99.1 FM.

Now, the couple couldn't be happier.

"Solmart Media is our American dream."

STRONG RESUME

Mercedes Soler has had a busy career leading up to her current position at Solmart Media, where she oversees the news and editorial content. She also spends time at Solmart Media on community outreach, advocacy and marketing. Other stops include:

- Almost two decades at Univision Communications Inc. in Miami.
- An anchor for CNN Español from 2010 to 2016 on a show called "NotiMujer," which translates to "News Women."
- Co-authored the book "Dish & Tell: Love and Secrets" with a group of friends that focuses on women's experiences. The book went on to be adapted as a musical.
- A columnist for *El Nuevo Herald*, a sister paper to the *Miami Herald*.
- Taught journalism classes in Spanish with an affiliation through the University of Miami.
- A subcontractor for the U.S. State Department, where she taught media strategies.
- A keynote speaker for several women empowerment and media conferences, including the Voice + Visibility Women's Summit in Sarasota. She was also chosen as a panelist for the 2022 summit's Latina Leadership panel.



We were able to make changes by providing hope, information, companionship, entertainment and a friendly voice. Mercedes Soler | Solmart Media

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