

BREAKING BARRIERS

A VETERAN COP AND FIREFIGHTER ARE SHOWING THEIR COMMUNITY THAT A STRONG LATINA CAN DEFY EVERY STEREOTYPE.

BY DIANA KELLY



THEY FIRST MET IN HIGH SCHOOL.



CHANGING HISTORY

YAISA I was one of the first two Latinas to make it into the Jersey City Fire Department, in 2013. Firefighting requires great physical strength, but if I train regularly, I know that age and being a woman won't be a factor in doing what I love.

ROSSY I became the first female Latina officer to be a part of the K9 unit in Jersey City, and I love what I do. I constantly get positive remarks from the public, especially women.

ALTERING THE PERCEPTION OF WOMEN

ROSSY If you're considering a career path in law enforcement—go for it! You have an advantage as a Latina, especially if you're a Spanish-speaking woman in a diverse neighborhood, like I am in Jersey City.

YAISA As a woman, I stick out at a fire, but people will come up to me to shake my hand afterward and bring their kids up to ask questions. We're removing the barriers and limitations set by people who believe this is a man's job.

■ **YAISA GOMEZ IS A 38-YEAR-OLD FIREFIGHTER IN JERSEY CITY, N.J.,** who was born in Puerto Rico to Dominican parents. Her friend, Rossy Barzola, 36, a Jersey City police officer, is a first-generation American born to Ecuadorian parents. They met playing basketball in high school and reconnected later when they had a college class together. Since Gomez lived and worked in Jersey City and Barzola was a local police officer, they would see each other around town and catch up. Here's how they got started in male-dominated careers.

FINDING THEIR CALLING IN LIFE

ROSSY The lack of women in law enforcement drove me to follow this path, and I knew I was capable of becoming a police officer. Listening to Jersey City cops' stories in my family's restaurant when growing up made me want to become an officer.

YAISA When I was 19, the fire prevention department did a presentation at a school where I was an assistant teacher, and one of the firefighters encouraged me to take the test. I became a firefighter at age 33.



K9 STALWART CJ—OUR BEST BUDDY!

PHOTOGRAPHS: NANCY BOROWICK.