

CONNECTIONS

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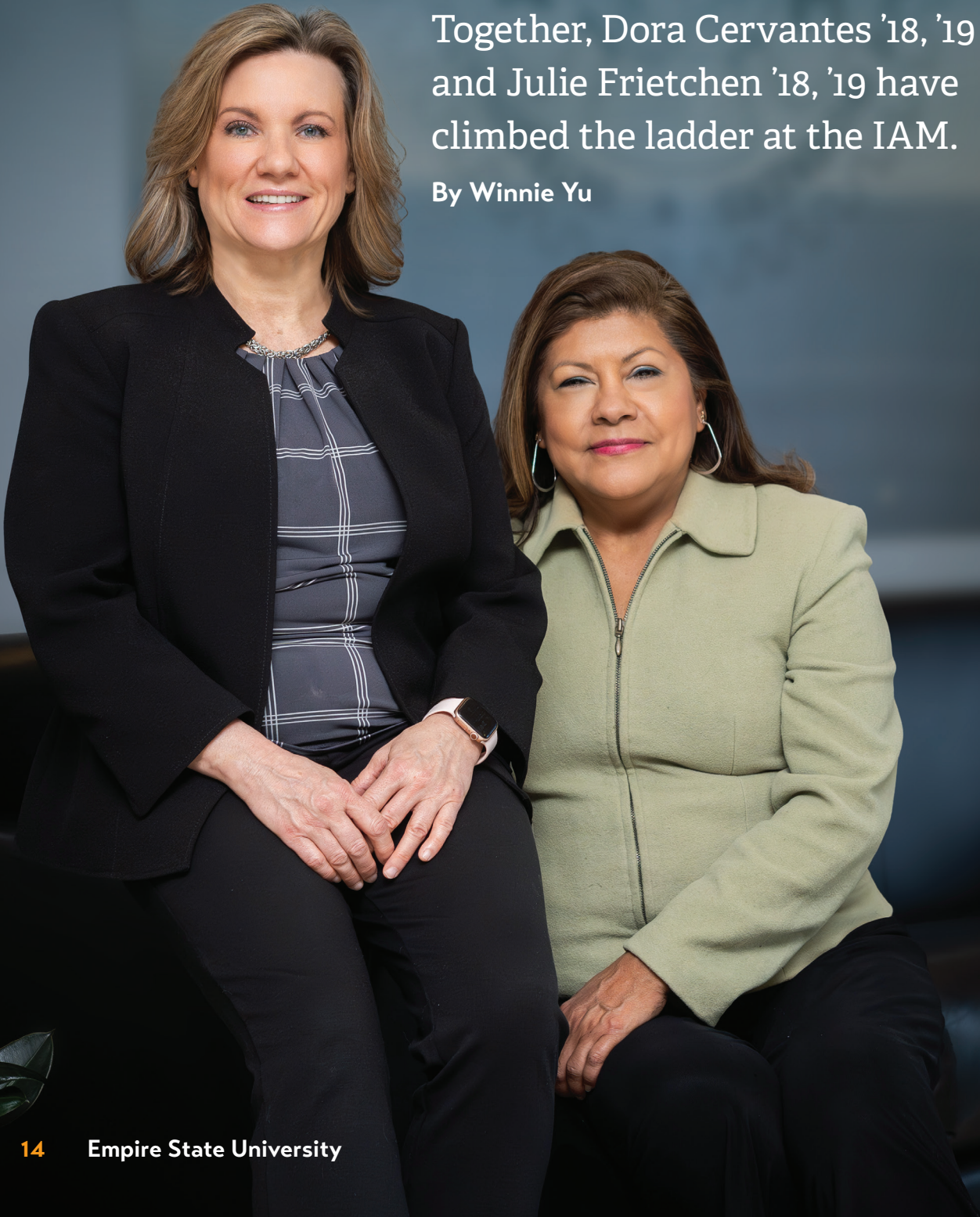


COVER STORY

A FRIENDSHIP BUILT ON LABOR

Together, Dora Cervantes '18, '19
and Julie Frietchen '18, '19 have
climbed the ladder at the IAM.

By Winnie Yu



Julie Frietchen '18, '19 was a new business agent for the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM) when she was handed her first arbitration case in 2000. A flight attendant had been fired and was claiming wrongful termination. Frietchen had to prove it.

"They just said 'Here, you have an arbitration in a few months,' and they left me with the files," says Frietchen. "And I was like, 'Now what am I supposed to do?'"

While attending the IAM's annual conference, she enlisted the help of her friend Dora Cervantes '18, '19, another new business agent who had started just two months after Frietchen. The two hunkered down in a Las Vegas hotel room and went to work, scouring contracts and preparing their arguments for the arbitration.

"It was the two of us brainstorming," says Cervantes, who is a Foundation Board member at Empire State University. "We had no experience. We just combined our best thoughts and experiences and put it together and she won."

Today, Frietchen is the director of the Women's and Human Rights Department for the IAM, and Cervantes is the organization's general secretary-treasurer, the first woman and Hispanic to serve in that role in IAM's 130-year history. IAM represents more than 600,000 members who work in industries as diverse as aerospace, automotive, and transportation.

RIISING TOGETHER

For Frietchen and Cervantes, the arbitration case was just another chapter in the story of their 30-plus years of friendship, cemented by a passion for supporting women in labor, their careers at the IAM, and their college educations at SUNY Empire and the National Labor College.

The two first met in 1994 while organizing workers at their respective airlines. Cervantes worked as a reservation agent for Southwest, and Frietchen was a flight attendant for what was then Continental Airlines.

"I think we were in Newark, having an open house meeting to kick off the organizing campaign," Cervantes says. "Julie was the lodge president. We were probably two of the youngest people and two of the few women. I was pregnant, and Julie had a broken leg, and we were out there just hustling."

"It didn't stop us," Frietchen adds with a laugh.

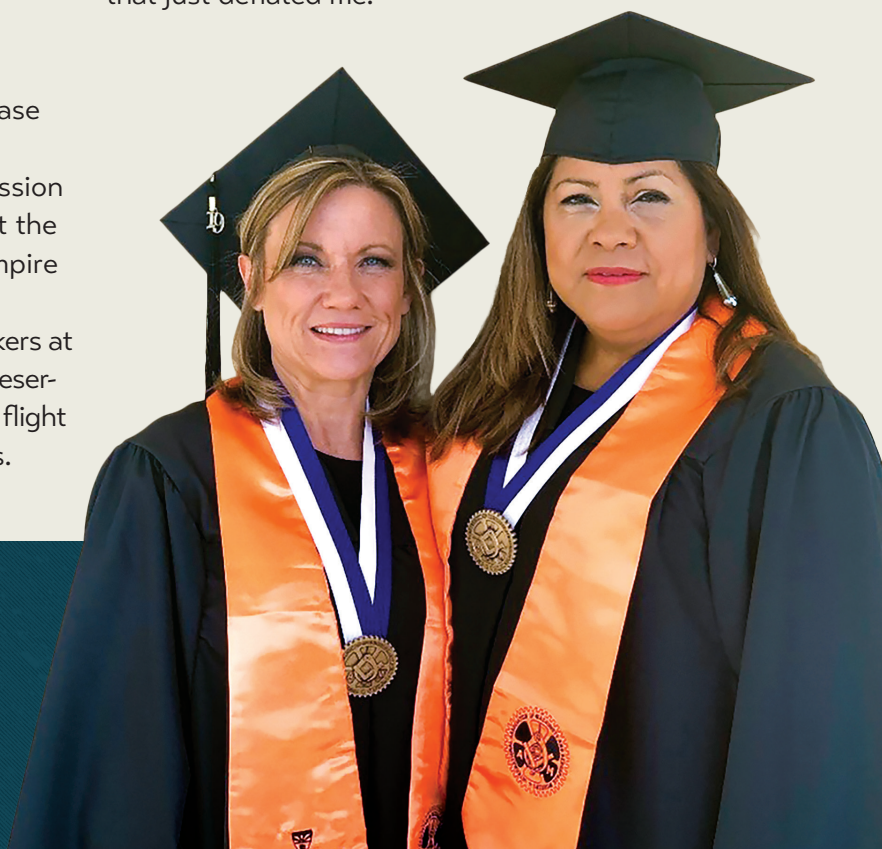
Nothing did. Through the years, the two women, who now both live in the Washington D.C. area, became co-mentors to each other and close friends, as they both rose to leadership positions in IAM. Cervantes, a mother of two, even became the godmother to Frietchen's daughter.

Breaking into the upper echelons however, wasn't easy. There weren't many women in the union, and even fewer in leadership positions.

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Dora Cervantes '18, '19

"I remember being at the convention where the women's department was established in 1996," says Frietchen, who got her current job in 2022. "I had a female mentor, and she said 'Don't get too involved in the women's department. It's a career killer.' And that just deflated me."



Frietchen and Cervantes graduated from SUNY Empire in 2019 with their master's degrees.

THE COLLEGE YEARS

Getting a college degree, they agreed, was critical to helping them move ahead. "I always looked at the extra study as an advantage for me if I wanted to climb the ladder and advance myself, with help from my sister Julie here," says Cervantes, who became general-secretary treasurer in 2015.

The two women took advantage of IAM's partnership with the National Labor College, which is now closed, and got their Bachelor of Arts degrees in labor studies. When the IAM launched a partnership with SUNY Empire, Cervantes and Frietchen were among the first to sign up. They both got their master's in work and labor policy and advanced certificates in women and gender studies.

trying to get a master's degree under my belt," she says.

But as an education rep for the IAM at the time, Frietchen knew she had to practice what she preached: the importance of education. "If I wanted to get other people to go through these programs, I thought I should set an example," she says.

TAKING THE LEADS

These days, women make up 28% of IAM's workforce, and more women are assuming leadership roles. But women still face harassment, sometimes even from each other. "Women are very hard on ourselves, too," Frietchen says. "We don't want to take on a job unless we know we're going to be perfect at it



Frietchen and Cervantes at the Grand Lodge Convention in San Francisco in 2000.

workplace challenges, share stories, and provide support. They also shadow people in leadership positions to learn what they do.

The goal is to inspire women to

Boss

“

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Dora Cervantes '18, '19



Going to college while working and raising kids proved exhausting. "I was trying to put a convention together for over 2,000 people, running the office, trying to pay the bills and keep the lights on, and then going home and studying every night," Cervantes says. "What made it really good was I had Julie for a study partner, Julie who was on my butt every day, asking 'Have you completed the assignment?'"

Frietchen had her share of challenges too. "I was a single mom, working full time, and

while men will just do it."

In 2022, with the blessing of the IAM's Executive Council, Frietchen's department created a one-year mentoring program for women called the Leadership Excellence Assembly of Dedicated Sisters or LEADS.

Participants take monthly online courses on everything from how to be a shop steward to retirement security. They also participate in mentoring circles — Frietchen and Cervantes each lead one — where the women gather in small groups to discuss

take on leadership positions. The first cohort graduated 120 women, and some of the women have already moved into leadership roles. The program recently accepted 170 into its second cohort.

"We want to see more women in leadership positions because we do better when there's diversity in our contracts, our bargaining units, and our leadership positions," Frietchen says. "We all have different ways of looking at things and see the world differently. If we put our heads together, we can have better solutions."