

## Member Portrait

### True to Her Venezuelan Heritage: The Possibilities Are Endless for Hilda Ochoa-Brillembourg

BY DERIK L. RICE

**T**o understand Hilda Ochoa-Brillembourg, CFA, one needs to look no further than her three grown children. “They are all wonderful, yet idiosyncratic, in their own ways,” she said beaming with pride. “Andres is into artistry, Clara is a humanitarian, and Arturo will likely be a businessman.” And Ms. Ochoa-Brillembourg? She embodies the best in each of them.

As one of the “50 Smartest Women in the Money Business” — according to *Money* magazine — Ms. Ochoa-Brillembourg’s business savvy is evident. But upon further examination, the depth of her persona is revealed. For beneath the chic facade is a warm and caring soul driven by the innate belief that all things are possible.

“I owe my sense of freedom and possibility to growing up in Venezuela,” said Ms. Ochoa-Brillembourg. “Venezuelans think everything is possible, even what is not.” Such optimistic determination has served Ms. Ochoa-Brillembourg, her clients, and the community well during her lifetime, which began on 8 July 1944, in Caracas, Venezuela.

Upon graduating in 1967 with a degree in economics from the Universidad Catolica Andres Bello in Venezuela, Hilda Ochoa worked as the treasurer of the public utility company in Caracas — C.C. Luz Electrica de Venezuela. After a few years, she longed for more. “I felt I needed further training and centering, and more intellectual robustness,” said Ms. Ochoa-Brillembourg. “I felt I needed to ground myself professionally and build my character. I felt I needed to grow up more and be exposed to broader and deeper influences. I thought I needed to learn English!” Ms. Ochoa selected Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA, as her training ground.

After receiving a Fulbright-Hayes Scholarship and financial assistance from her employer, Ms. Ochoa — who at 26 was recently divorced and mother to one-year-old Andres — left the security of her homeland and family for the United States. She equates that transition in her life to a bit of



From her Virginia office at Strategic Investment Group, Hilda Ochoa-Brillembourg enjoys views of Georgetown in Washington, D.C., where she resides, and historic landmarks, like the Lincoln Memorial, Washington Monument, and U.S. Capitol.

Venezuelan street graffiti: “I looked into the abyss and took a step forward.”

“Earning a masters degree in public administration was essentially my entry way into economics,” said Ms. Ochoa-Brillembourg. “It was a combined finance and economics program that included portfolio theory courses that were being taught by John Lintner, who was, along with Sharpe and Fama, one of the three pillars of modern finance.”

Ms. Ochoa’s experience at Harvard whetted her appetite for more “intellectual robustness,” and upon receipt of her MPA in 1972, she decided to pursue a doctorate in business administration in finance at the Harvard Business School. With plans to resume work in corporate finance, Ms. Ochoa returned to Venezuela where she began writing her dissertation on applying portfolio theory to the global Venezuelan market, while at the same time taking on some consulting and lecturing assignments.

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#### TIDBITS

##### HILDA OCHOA-BRILLEMBOURG

**Favorite food:** Pasta

**Last book read:** *The Art of Possibility*

**Favorite way to unwind:** Watch 8 to 10 movies in one day

**Pet peeve:** People who abuse power

**Favorite pastime:** Reading and spending time with friends

**One thing to do before she dies:**  
Produce a movie

**Favorite get-away:** Her farm on the Maryland Eastern Shore

**How she wants to be remembered:**  
As someone who lived a full life



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After four years (and a still-incomplete dissertation), Ms. Ochoa once again journeyed to the United States where she went to work at the World Bank headquarters in Washington, D.C. "I felt that I needed to center myself intellectually and professionally," said Ms. Ochoa-Brillembourg. "The one job that



was open to me was in the pension fund area. I have always had a bit of a value, reversion-to-mean type of orientation. Given that the markets had done so poorly within the previous 10 years, I figured that it was going to be an extraordinary area in which to get into."

Moreover, Ms. Ochoa had just met Arturo Brillembourg, CFA, an economist with the bank's International Monetary Fund. "Arturo helped to clarify my thought process," she said. "Men do have an influence on women's lives from time to time." In 1977, Ms. Ochoa became Ms. Ochoa-Brillembourg.

Throughout the decade during which Ms. Ochoa-Brillembourg managed the bank's pension fund, it grew from US\$180 million to US\$2.1 billion. At the same time, her family grew from one to three children. Aside from hands-on portfolio management experi-

ence, Ms. Ochoa-Brillembourg made some astute observations during her tenure at the World Bank that would help to shape her professional ideology.

"I developed a sense for the importance of being able to maneuver...of being able to always have the helicopter view of things," said Ms. Ochoa-Brillembourg. "I resisted the trend to build a

**"We have a duty to control the quality of our work lives," said Hilda Ochoa-Brillembourg. "Given that we spend two-thirds of our waking hours working, we might as well get the most out of it."**

lot of internal staff. In a competitive market you have to be able to move quickly, and I perceived that you could not move quickly if you were building up an army of employees. Then you were managing people, not assets."

Ms. Ochoa-Brillembourg was determined to maintain her small and agile work group. However, with pressure mounting to conform to a corporate environment that she did not support, she began considering other employment opportunities. "I started getting job offers from places where the pay was higher, plus, they were offering more in terms of a career path," she said. "But I did not feel comfortable accepting any of the offers. I wanted to be part of a work environment where people would be growing constantly and would have

opportunities to learn other things, not by force, but by motivation."

Through a process of elimination, Ms. Ochoa-Brillembourg concluded that she wanted to be an entrepreneur. The World Bank realized what a loss her departure would be and, to its credit, fashioned a way to continue benefiting from her talent by negotiating a contract by which she would still manage the bank's pension fund. What is more, she was permitted to hand pick five senior-level colleagues at the bank to become partners in her new venture. "I could not imagine putting together a better group of people," she said.

On 1 November 1987, Ms. Ochoa-Brillembourg founded Strategic Investment Group<sup>SM</sup> (SIG) based in the Washington, D.C. area — two weeks after the Dow Jones industrial average plummeted 508 points. "I remember 'Black Monday' the way some people remember when they heard that President Kennedy had been shot," she said. "I thought we would never make it." But true to her can-do Venezuelan spirit, Ms. Ochoa-Brillembourg found a way.

"When the crash came, the investors in our US\$50 million emerging market fund — for which we had about US\$75 million in purchases — backed out," she said. "So we pulled up our boot straps and visited our capital partners — a group of European banks — in Paris, Geneva, and Luxembourg. We developed a scenario analysis that became the forerunner of value-risk analysis, which simply said, 'It looks ugly, but what if it is not as ugly as it looks?'" The partners' perseverance paid off, and in April 1988, they launched the emerging market fund with US\$20 million.

As an outsourcer of investment management services to benefit plans,

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profession are being centralized in financial centers like London, Frankfurt — places other than Budapest,” said Mr. Préda. “Our challenge is to identify those areas that will have a long-term future in this region, such as private banking, personal banking, and asset management, so that we can focus on our future.”



**With more than 60 Hungarians enrolled in the CFA Program, HSIP's membership of less than 20 is expected to grow dramatically. Pictured from left, Ali Yakhyayev; Andrea Toth, CFA; István Préda, CFA, (President); Krisztina Kozma; Alexandre Tchesnov.**

With so many undertakings, it's easy to forget that HSIP is still in its infancy. But recently HSIP members convened to identify the chapter's guiding values, which will be Integrity, Professionalism, and Development. The session will be continued in January with the goal of refining a mission statement and articulating a long-term vision that is relevant to all members.

Guided by such democratic ideals, HSIP's decision to hold new elections this past December is not surprising. Mr. Préda explained, “When you form a chapter, you have to start from the top down because the people who are launching the idea will have to act as the officers of the chapter. But we believe that the members should be given the opportunity to decide whom they want to be their leaders.”

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endowments, foundations, and family trusts, SIG was founded upon Ms. Ochoa-Brillembourg's belief that less is more. “By outsourcing our services, we are able to hire the ‘best of the breed,’ rather than trying to integrate all of our functions in-house,” she said. Through its “managers of managers” concept and affiliate organizations, SIG currently manages US\$17.7 billion in total assets for more than 300 clients.

With a relatively lean staff of 40 employees — in addition to another 100 or so employees working among three affiliates — SIG upholds high standards. “The culture of the firm is one of professional excellence and respect for one another,” said Ms. Ochoa-Brillembourg. “We are attracted to well-rounded people who are smart, wise, knowledgeable, and curious — and most importantly — care more about the group than themselves. There are no ‘stars’ here. The one common thread in everyone is professional excellence and integrity.”

Those who are fortunate enough to be a part of the SIG team can take advantage of a generous training policy that offers reimbursement for tuition and related expenses, such as the CFA Program. “We will not force people to do anything; it has to come from within. But the fact is, every investment officer here — and even some of our legal staff — have gone through the CFA Program,” said Ms. Ochoa-Brillembourg, who completed the program herself in 1985. “To me, the CFA designation is just as — or even more — valuable than an MBA from a good school. I very much encourage our MBA graduates to pursue the CFA designation.”

Ms. Ochoa-Brillembourg also advocates less orthodox forms of intellectual

growth. “I think belonging to organizations that are not directly related to your work nurtures the creativity in your job to be free to think differently,” she said. “When you are solving problems that are not related to your everyday life, it gives you a sense of perspective that you do not always get in your job if work is all you do.”

Case in point: Ms. Ochoa-Brillembourg is an avid supporter of the Washington Opera and the National Symphony Orchestra, serving on the Board of Directors for both groups. On 1 December 2000, she chaired the National Symphony Orchestra Ball, which raised a record US\$1.5 million for NSO music education and community outreach programs. “Music nurtures your vision of life,” she said. “I am a great believer that if you bring music to children, you give them an edge that they otherwise would not have. When you see a child become reborn in music, it is quite amazing.”

Ms. Ochoa-Brillembourg is also involved in a start-up organization known as the Youth Orchestra of the Americas. “It is one of the most rewarding things I have been working on,” she said. “If everything goes as planned, by 2002 we will have the first youth orchestra — 100 musicians ages 14 to 24, the best of all Latin and North American musicians.”

Clearly, children have a special place in Hilda Ochoa-Brillembourg's heart. She has the intuitive ability to see the potential and uniqueness in all children, particularly her own. As she lovingly boasts about them (as only a mother can), one wonders if she has ever thought about why they are such extraordinary human beings. After delving into the many facets of her passionate life, the answer is obvious.