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U.S. honors Novato entrepreneur



J photo/Scott Manchester

**A minority,
woman, fighter
– and a success**

INCHARGE: Belinda Guadarrama, President of GC Micro, Guadarrama's computer firm.

By Dan Fost

Independent Journal reporter

Belinda Guadarrama knows the struggles facing minorities and women in business. She's lived them.

When she started her Novato high-tech firm, GC Micro, 11 years ago, she couldn't get a bank to lend her even \$5,000.

Businessmen told her – to her face – they didn't think a minority had the expertise to meet their needs.

When she sued the government to show that minorities were not getting their fair share of federal contracts, some of her clients cut her off.

Guadarrama overcame those hurdles. She won her lawsuit and built a thriving business that brought in \$21 million in sales last year.

For her achievements, and for her advocacy on behalf of others, the U.S. Department of Commerce has named Guadarrama, 40, its National Minority Female Entrepreneur of the Year. Guadarrama was notified of the award earlier this week, and said the department planned to announce it today.

In winning an award from the government that she once took to court – spending nearly four years and, ultimately, almost \$100,000 in legal fees – Guadarrama took great satisfaction.

"Would I do it over again? Actually, I would," she said yesterday in an interview in her Bel Marin Keys office, her little Havanese dogs Archie and Sweetie at her feet. "It was important to show the federal government – the

Department of Defense – that the minority business community takes an active involvement in programs set up to work for us."

"As a side note, it also showed a lot of other companies that as a small business, you can make a difference," she added. "People said it was David and Goliath, but we won. If you feel strongly about an issue, you have to take it all the way."

In the letter nominating Guadarrama for the award, Marvin R. Smith, manager of the business affirmative action and vendor assessment office at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, said the victory in her lawsuit "could mean \$10 billion in contracts for minority firms."

Smith's letter listed a host of achievements:

■ "Ms. Guadarrama has established her firm as one of the nation's leading suppliers of computer hardware and software products to the defense and aerospace industries. GC Micro has been rated as one of the 500 largest Hispanic-owned companies in the United States for 1993, 1994, 1995 and 1996."

■ "Ms. Guadarrama has continuously demonstrated that her commitment to excellence is only exceeded by her determination to consistently provide quality products and services at fair and reasonable prices."

■ She has won numerous awards, including California Hispanic Corporation of the Year for 1997, and has served on many advocacy panels, including her current stint as

chairwoman of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's Minority Business Resource Advisory Committee.

■ She is involved in many community projects, including sponsorship of a Little League for the Ochoa Migrant Farm Workers' Camp in Gilroy.

"Belinda Guadarrama has clearly established that being successful in business and 'walking the talk' are not mutually exclusive of each other," Smith wrote.

Guadarrama believes that programs designed to help minorities, women and other small-business owners are important just to create a level playing field. "Then it's up to the small business to show you can do the job," she said.

She is a second-generation American. Her father, the son of immigrants, grew up in San Antonio, but his military career kept the family on the move. She earned a degree in economics from Trinity University in San Antonio, and did graduate work at the University of Texas before spending nine years working for the state government in Austin.

She moved to Novato to work for a computer sales company, but when that firm fell apart a year later, she decided to strike out on her own. She had \$20,000 from the sale of her house in Texas, and - unable to secure a bank loan - started selling software to the government, to government contractors, and to the University of California system.

She picked those clients shrewdly "I knew I needed customers that you know

will pay," she said. Plus "I had a strong background in working with large bureaucracies. I knew how to talk to them. I knew how to dress. I understood the paperwork we were going to have to be dealing with."

Still, she faced challenges.

She went to one meeting with clients in Los Angeles and brought along a 21-year old male associate. "They directed every question to my employee," she said. "They simply made it very clear they did not want to interact with me."

Guadarrama knew she could serve the company, though, and did not abandon her effort. "If I said I didn't want to work with them. I'm giving in to that stereotype," she said. "I didn't want to give in Had I just gone away, they would have been left with the image that women were not competent to deal with."

She not only kept the client, but ultimately they nominated her for one of her many awards.

Another client told her that "minority businesses did not have the financial capability or experience to run their product line accurately. I was appalled they would say that to me. I had had a staff of 15 people at the attorney general's office, and they're telling me I don't have management experience?"

Did she quit?

"I could become completely offended," she said, "or I could go back to the win-win: I get the sale, and their perception is changed about minority businesses. That makes it easier for the minority woman who comes behind me."