

Her goal: Hispanics in state Legislature

By Tim Richard
staff writer

Florida has a Hispanic governor, many Hispanic legislators and mayors. Michigan has no Hispanic legislators and a handful of Hispanic judges.

"One of my goals is to see more Hispanics involved at the district levels and run for office," said Laura Reyes Kopack, the newly elected sixth vice chair of the Michigan Republican Party.

"I'd like to see more fund-raisers and possibly establishment of a PAC (political action committee)," she added in an interview in her home in

a two-year-old Livonia subdivision. "There is a Latino of Livonia — a small pocket in West Bloomfield — other groups in Grosse Pointe, Downer, Saginaw, Muskegon, Lansing, Holland, Port Huron and Adrian," said the former Westland resident.

And she has seen that political interest grow in the last decade.

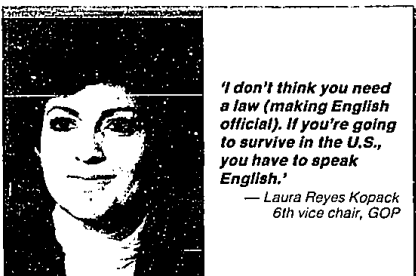
By DAY, Kopack is an attorney handling real estate and zoning matters for Detroit Edison Co., so she will have to do a lot of her political work at night.

Husband Al, a district sales manager for AMR Freight System, helps. "He's been really supportive. Without him, I couldn't have finished law

school," she said. They have daughters ages 4 and 1.

"My parents were from Mexico. I was raised in Detroit and went to Rosary High School, Wayne State University and the University of Detroit Law School.

"Politically, I was active in the college Republicans at Wayne and worked for Republican candidates — local and judicial — in law school. In 1978, I ran for the Wayne State University Board of Governors," she said. That was a Democratic year, when the GOP lost its U.S. Senate seat.



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— Laura Reyes Kopack
6th vice chair, GOP

"HISPANIC" Kopack explained, is a legal term used by the federal government for the census. It covers persons of Spanish, South American, Mexican and Cuban ancestry. Terms like "Chicano" and "Latino" are going out of use.

The Michigan 1980 census showed 1 percent of the population as Hispanic, but Kopack thinks they were undercounted and closer to 2 percent.

Democratic national candidates Michael Dukakis and Lloyd Bentsen both addressed campaign audiences in Spanish, but Kopack doubts it made a lot of difference.

"A great number of Hispanics vote Republican. That goes in my family. Historically, Hispanics have favored Democrats because of their labor positions. But that is changing as more become business and professional people.

"Many Cubans are anti-communist and favor Republican stands on defense. There are strong divisions," she said.

Republican Hispanic movement that resulted in creation of the sixth vice chair several years ago.

Two years ago she sought the post herself but was overpowered by the Pat Robertson forces, who picked Angela Mata.

"I didn't want to run against an incumbent this year," said Kopack. "So I spoke to the (Robertson) people in the party structure, and they hadn't seen her in a year and a half."

Her election in the Feb. 17 state convention at Grand Rapids was unanimous.

HISPANICS ARE cool to a proposal by U.S. Rep. William Broomfield, R-Lake Orion, to make English the official national language.

"I don't think you need a law. If you're going to survive in the U.S., you have to speak English," she said.

Seven states, including California, have such laws, which Hispanics fear can be used punitively. They cite the case of court clerks who were fired for speaking Spanish during a break. The clerks won only after appealing to the U.S. Supreme Court.

KOPACK HAS been active in the

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MICHIGAN'S BEST known Hispanics are U.S. District Judge George LaPlata of West Bloomfield Township, a former Oakland circuit judge with a Republican background, and state Board of Education member Gumecindo Salas, a Democrat from Lansing.

Others are Detroit Recorder's Judge Isadore Torres and Workers Comp Appeals Commission member Steve Gonzales.

"A few outstate city council members and clerks have come and gone," she said. "There's no one in the Legislature."

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