by Suzanne M. Howard

INNER CITY KID MAKES GOOD

AG ENGINEERING CHANGED HER LIFE

Lynda Cabrales, who grew up in the inner city of Chicago, thought milk came from a store. Not until she attended a summer program in high school did she realize milk came from cows!

"That summer program in food science opened up my eyes to agriculture," says Cabrales, an ASABE member. "I realized there were more than cows, plows, and sows in ag engineering. There was processing and eating and people interacting, so much to it, that when I caught a glimpse, I felt there was definitely a place for me."

Lynda Cabrales loves her job as a process engineer at Kraft Foods.

Good in math and science, and a National Hispanic Scholar, Cabrales says she liked the idea that agricultural engineering was an applied profession.

"It was something I felt I could do, work with, relate to, even though I didn't have an ag background," Cabrales states.

She realized that the food and bioprocessing area appealed to her. When searching out colleges, she found the people and the program at the University of Illinois (UI) welcoming, open, and "it just seemed to fit," she says.

"I stuck with a good thing and held on with both hands," she says laughingly.

Cabrales earned her bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees, all in ag engineering from UI.

"I would not be where I am if not for the opportunities of the ag engineering department, the program, the professors, and the college. It changed my life," Cabrales says.

"They saw me doing something and being someone that I couldn't see myself doing or being," she says. "They had faith in my capability and a vision of myself bigger than anything I could imagine."

Cabrales is a process engineer at Kraft Foods in their Madison, Wis., Research and Development Department. Her work supports the Oscar Mayer brand, Lunchables®, hot dogs, deli plates, meat processing, bacon, sausage, etc.

She says she loves to "come in and play with stuff." She works on processes, products, equipment, and gets to test them and see how things work. When the testing is completed, she organizes the results and provides feedback to the company as to whether the technology, process, or equipment has a use, or if it is too limiting and why.

Cabrales says Kraft Foods is a great fit for her.

"It's a great company, the biggest food company in the United States," she says. "They also have some real cool toys I can play with," she laughs. "I'm an engineer, so those are the kinds of things you think about. There is so much I could work on. If I get bored or don't like something, there is somewhere else in the company I can go," she adds.

Having grown up in a family that experienced financial hardships, Cabrales says they may not have had meat on the table, but they always had enough to eat. Education was valued above all else in her family, she says, and her parents saw to it that their kids attended private schools.

She remembers getting the opportunity to see her father at work at Brach's Candy Co. in Chicago.

"He worked two eight-hour shifts to support us," says Cabrales. "I got to see what my dad did for eight of those hours a day ... it was back-breaking work. It broke my heart," she says emotionally. "At that point, I knew whatever opportunity I was going to get, that I was going to hold on with both hands. I knew there weren't many opportunities in the world if you didn't have an education," she adds. "I was going to make it, but how was the question."

She advises others not to give up. "Look for your place wherever it may be. Believe in yourself because other people believe in you. Take advantage of whatever opportunity you have, whether it is big or small. And take it one day at a time," she says.

> "Take advantage of whatever opportunity you have, whether it is big or small."

"I never thought I would be here with a Ph.D in agricultural engineering. I think to myself, 'Oh my God, who is that?' There is so much you can do with this degree, so many options.

"I really love what I do, and I get paid to do it! The fact that I'm getting a very good salary to do something that I enjoy makes me realize that all the time and energy I spent in school is worth it. There isn't any greater satisfaction than that!

"I feel so fulfilled as to where I've been. I feel like every step I've taken has paid off," says Cabrales. "Right now I'm basking in the sunshine, and I honestly feel like the world is my oyster. I have so many opportunities.

"Ag engineering will always be near and dear to my heart," she says with total conviction.