

Gabe Lazo's hire brings meaning to the Latino community

In front of an audience filled with UCF members, students and staff, [Gabe Lazo's](#) voice cracked as he started thanking his mom for how far he's come.

During his introductory speech, new women's basketball head coach Lazo took a 10-second pause to gather his emotions at the Addition Financial Arena on April 9. He attributed his success to his mom, who was sitting in the front row.

"Thank you for everything," Lazo said in Spanish.

UCF Athletics announced on April 4 that Lazo, a Cuban-American and Miami native, will be the next women's basketball head coach. He is the first Latino head coach in the Power Four, the top four college athletic conferences at the D1 level.

According to UCF, [31%](#) of the UCF student population is Hispanic or Latino, making it the second-largest demographic in the school. This hire not only means something for the Latino community but also for the Latino community within the school, as it is another way to connect to this demographic, UCF Athletic Director Terry Mohajir said.

"We have a lot of young people that celebrate and are proud of their heritage," Mohajir said. "I think it's just another person that is in a leadership position on this campus that can connect with the demographic."

Sophomore health sciences student Isabella Noda is a Latina who explained the importance of this hire. She said that this hire can encourage Latino students to pursue leadership positions and inspire future hiring diversity.

"As a Latina, it is meaningful to see people with similar backgrounds show pride in where they come from," Noda said. "Not everyone has the privilege or freedom to openly celebrate their heritage."

On the first page of the [Latino Association of Basketball Coaches](#) (LABC) website, one of the first pictures will show Lazo smiling from cheek to cheek with other board members.

Lazo has been an active member of the LABC, an organization to help promote the representation of Latinos in basketball, for almost its entirety. Board member Lucas Ramirez said Lazo has been an instrumental part of growing this organization.

LABC's mission is to help Latino members get jobs, network and support each other through their successes, Ramirez said. Having Lazo hired at UCF is a monumental moment for Latino coaches, as the Latino community can have someone who they can relate to, who looks and speaks the same way as them.

"When Gabe does a good job, it's going to make athletic directors and presidents and search firms be like, 'All right, he can do it. So let's hire someone else who looks like him, sounds like him,'" Ramirez said.

LABC board member Omar Sanchez said Lazo is opening a new door for the Latino community, especially when it comes to representation. He said the number of Latinos involved in basketball isn't noticeable to the public unless they are in the field.

“We have a head coach at a P4 and being at an institution that is Latino serving,” Sanchez said. “You are breaking barriers that sometimes we don’t see ourselves in those kind of roles.”

UCF is Lazo’s first head coaching position since he started coaching in 2012 at John A. Ferguson Senior High School. Raul Placeres, Maryville College men's head coach and an old friend of Lazo’s, said jobs are limited in this field and make it hard for coaches to find positions.

“From division one to division three in the NCAA, there's about 1200 jobs," Placeres said. "He is one of 1200. It's harder to be a head coach in college basketball than it is to become a doctor.”

Placeres said there is not enough data for Latino representation in basketball to show that a Latino coach is a success or a failure. He hopes Lazo understands the importance and meaning of this opportunity.

“The pressure of him being successful is a privilege,” Placeres said. “It's really not pressure. It's an opportunity to showcase himself at the biggest stage.”

Placeres has known Lazo for 29 years and said he remembered the time he used to play against Lazo in Miami, where Placeres would win. The only time they were teammates was when they were in Tennessee together and joined a barn league, a basketball court made out of a barn.

While talking to Lazo on the morning of his introductory press conference, Placeres told him the story of how Mickey Mouse started from someone bringing people together to have fun, then became a big industry. He said that relates to Lazo’s own story of a Cuban boy from Miami to a D1 head coach.

“10 years ago, a decade ago, he was working at a park, and 10 years later, he's the first Latino head coach in P4, so that's an incredible story,” Placeres said.

Lazo said there are many Latinos in Orlando, and he takes pride in his heritage and believes his hire will inspire people around the world, especially high school coaches.

“Now they see someone that was in their shoes, and I take a lot of pride into that,” Lazo said. “I put a little bit of pressure on myself, but it's okay. I'm okay with the pressure.”

“For all my Hispanic people who have dreams, si se puede,” Lazo said.