

RENATA SOTO

Renata Soto is a Costa Rican-born social entrepreneur based in Nashville, TN.

She is co-founder and Executive Director of **Conexión Américas**, a nonprofit organization that annually supports more than 8,000 Latino and other immigrant families in Tennessee in achieving their own version of the American dream: purchasing homes, starting businesses, learning English, supporting their children's school success and path to college, and becoming integral part of Tennessee's social, cultural and economic vitality.

Renata is the visionary behind **Casa Azafrán**, a nonprofit collaborative and community gathering place that has become the de-facto gateway to Nashville's International District. The 29,000 square-foot facility opened in December 2012 after a tenacious five-year effort and an unprecedented \$6 million public-private investment in Nashville's most ethnically diverse neighborhood. Today Casa Azafrán houses Conexión Américas and nine nonprofit and government partners under one roof. Together, they make Casa Azafrán a vibrant place for health services and counseling; adult education and after-school programming for children and youth; legal and financial services; entrepreneurship; community organizing; events; visual, performing and culinary arts. Casa Azafrán has become an iconic landmark in Nashville's urban landscape and a source of local pride and national attention. Even President Obama took notice and hosted a nationally televised town-hall meeting on immigration policy at Casa Azafrán in December 2014.

Renata's vision for equitable communities where all residents have access to beautiful shared civic spaces where to play, gather and participate extended further in August 2018 with the opening of **Azafrán Park**, a \$2.6 million public park located next to Casa Azafrán. As with Casa Azafrán, Renata led the design team, fundraising and public-private partnership that made it possible.

After 23 years in the nonprofit sector, Renata was eager to support a new cadre of change-makers of color and build a strong network among them. To that end, in 2017 she conceived and launched the **Mosaic Fellowship**, a year-long, cohort-based program that brings together African American, Latinx and other leaders of color in Tennessee to learn about each other's histories, discover shared values, foster deep bonds, and cultivate a common vision for their communities' future. The fellowship was inspired by and is designed based on Renata's own transformative experience in the Pahara Aspen Education Leadership Fellowship in 2015. There are 15 fellows currently participating in the inaugural class of the Mosaic Fellowship and the second class kicked off in November 2018.

Before starting Conexión Américas in 2002, Renata worked at United Way of Metropolitan Nashville, where she managed a grant-making portfolio of \$1.5 million and led neighborhood-based investment strategies for almost six years. She began her nonprofit career at the Latin American Association in Atlanta, GA, as communications manager in 1995.

OTHER LOCAL LEADERSHIP ROLES

Renata has been a leading force on efforts that have helped solidify Nashville's reputation as a city striving to be welcoming and inclusive. For example, she was a founding member of the **Nashville for All of Us Coalition**, which led the campaign that successfully defeated a 2009 English Only referendum that would have made English the official and only language of local government.

Renata's community involvement extends well beyond her commitment to Latino and immigrant communities. As a co-chairwoman of Mayor Karl Dean's Task Force on Children and Youth in 2010, she helped create the **Child and Youth Master Plan**, which is now a blueprint for efforts to ensure the well being of every young person from birth to adulthood in Nashville.

Other current volunteer involvement includes positions on the boards of the Belcourt Theater, the Nashville Civic Design Center and the Nashville Convention Center Authority.

NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT

Renata has served almost 10 years on the board of directors of **UnidosUS, formerly the National Council of La Raza (NCLR)**, the largest Latino advocacy and civil rights organization in the nation. She currently serves as Immediate Past Chair. As Chair from 2015-2018, she led the board at a critical time as the organization prepared for its 50th anniversary and carried out its historic rebranding from NCLR to UnidosUS. Renata was the first Central American and only the third leader of an UnidosUS Affiliate to become chair of the organization's board.

In 2012, Renata represented then NCLR (now UnidosUS) and was **spokesperson for a coalition of US-based unions and civil rights groups** who attended Daimler AG's annual shareholders meeting in Berlin, Germany, to voice concern for an Alabama law that legalized racial profiling and targeted immigrants. She addressed the more than 8,000 shareholders attending the meeting, urging Daimler executives to live up to corporate ethics and denounce a racist law in a state where Daimler produced its cars.

Renata was selected in 2015 for the **Pahara-Aspen Education Leadership Fellowship**, a two-year program of The Pahara and Aspen Institutes that provides "the opportunity to reflect on the values tensions involved in effective and enlightened leadership across the public, nonprofit and private sectors." She is now a member of the **Aspen Global Leadership Network**, "an international cadre of entrepreneurial, values-driven leaders who are driving creative and impactful efforts to solve some of the most difficult challenges facing our communities and global society."

In 2016, Renata was selected for the **Harvard Business School's Young American Leaders Program**, which aims "to develop a cadre of young leaders across the US who are able and eager to work across traditional boundaries to help their communities thrive."

In 2015, Renata led a delegation of US Latino leaders in a **Transatlantic Migration Study Tour to Germany co-sponsored by the Heinrich Böll Foundation-North America and UnidosUS** to promote dialogue between U.S. and German leaders on issues related to immigration, refugee, and integration

policy. Participants visited refugee centers and met with civil society leaders and elected officials at the federal, state and local levels in Berlin, Dusseldorf, Leipzig and Stuttgart.

In October 2018, Renata visited Mexico as one of 15 leaders chosen for the **Center for American Progress' US-Mexico Leaders Initiative**, which over time aims to create a binational network of alumni "building a new, vibrant, 21st Century U.S.-Mexico relationship" and "guide the next generation of global leaders on foreign policy."

Awards and Recognitions

- Renata was recognized in the inaugural "30 Under 30" list of the Nashville Post business magazine in 2001.
- The weekly magazine Nashville Scene in its 2003 "Best of Nashville" edition recognized Conexión Américas as Best Entrepreneurial Venture: "Conexión Américas, thanks in part to the visionary leadership of executive director Renata Soto, over the past 15 months has become the foremost Hispanic service and advocacy organization in Middle Tennessee, if not the entire state."
- Renata was selected as a "Woman of Influence" by the Nashville Business Journal in 2008.
- She received the Third Annual Edwina Hefner Community Leadership Award in 2009 presented by the Nashville Symphony, which recognizes leaders whose community work pay tribute to the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
- The Tennessee Titans selected Renata as the recipient of the inaugural NFL Hispanic Heritage Leadership Award in 2011.
- In 2012, Renata was inducted into the YWCA Academy of Women of Achievement.
- The Nashville Scene chose Renata as the [2013 "Nashvillian of the Year."](#)
- In 2014, the Nashville Scene recognized her as one of ["Twenty-five Nashvillians who've shaped the city for the better"](#) over the past 25 years.
- The Nashville Post recognized her with the 2015 Women of Power award.
- Tennessee State University chose her as a 2015 Woman of Legend & Merit.
- The Davidson County Democratic Party presented Renata with The 2015 Jane Eskind Pioneer Award, given annually to a "trailblazer who has advanced the causes of Tennesseans to ever-greater heights."
- The Tennessean, Nashville's daily newspaper, recognized Renata as ["one of six notable Middle Tennesseans of 2016."](#)
- The Islamic Center of Nashville honored her with the "Beyond Borders" Award "in recognition of her outstanding contribution to building a more just and inclusive Nashville" in 2017.
- The Nashville Public Education Foundation honored Renata in 2017 with the foundation's highest honor, the Nelson C. Andrews Distinguished Service Award, which recognizes "a civic, business or political leader in the Nashville community who has made a strong commitment supporting and advocating for public education."
- Renata has been named to the Nashville Business Journal "Power 100," a list of "the 100 most influential people in Nashville business" in 2016, 2017 and 2018.

Education

Renata studied Communications at the University of Costa Rica. She also attended Kenyon College, in Ohio, as a one-year visiting student thanks to a full scholarship, as well as Georgia State University, in Atlanta, GA.

Family

Renata is from San José, Costa Rica. She has lived in the United States since 1993. She is married to Pete Wooten, an executive at Pinnacle Bank, and has two children, Gabriel and Camila.