

BOOK EXCERPT FROM
María: Daughter of Immigrants

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¡Las Mujeres Valientes!

After my re-election in 1983 I decided to follow up on a plan I had been mulling over for several years. Investing in Latinas and their families was an investment that would reap benefits for many, as we were such a large part of the population. While I saw that Latinas and their families had problems, I also saw the great talent and potential in them. The women called on tremendous resources, whether it was education, personal resources of time and treasure, a particular expertise, or leadership abilities and exhibited a track record of giving back to the community. I thought to myself that, in the future, how Latina women fared in San Antonio would determine how we all would do. I decided that the time was ripe for me to use my forum and my position to bring together Hispanic women from all walks of life. Having women meet other women they would not normally meet would be a great contribution. They could form networks to help each other. The entire community would be the winners.

My plan was simple. We would organize a conference that would bring Latinas together. We started the planning process mid-year of 1983. I coordinated the conference with a planning committee of 117 Hispanic women! Through a letter signed by Barbie Hernandez, President of Mexican American Business Professional Women (MABPW) and myself, and with the help of other friends, we raised enough private funding that any woman who wanted to attend the conference could do so. We provided transportation, childcare, delicious meals,

and an exciting program of, by, and for Hispanas. On March 23-25, 1984, the campus of Our Lady of the Lake University was filled with over 1,000 women of all ages and from all parts of San Antonio and small communities nearby. The venue for “Hispanas Unidas: The Force of San Antonio” was made possible through the generosity of the Sisters of Divine Providence (CDP) under the leadership of their superior general Jane Ann Slater, CDP, and Our Lady of the Lake University (OLLU) president, Sister Elizabeth Ann Sultenfuss, CDP. We benefitted by the advocacy of Sister María Carolina Flores, director of the OLLU Center for Women in Church and Society. With the help of hundreds of volunteers, the event was successful beyond our expectations. Stories on Hispanic women ran in both local newspapers before, during, and after the event. Hispanas Unidas resulted in a true celebration of Hispanic women. In addition to local leaders, we invited Latina luminaries from other parts of the country —Marta Cotera, Chicana activist and author; Dr. Alicia Valladolid Cuarón, author and entrepreneur; and Senator Polly Baca of Colorado, one of only two Latina state senators in the country. All were women who had inspired me and I wanted them to inspire women in my community. Pride in our roots, confidence in our abilities, enthusiasm and a deep appreciation for our own power and agency were the outcomes of the event. As I look now at the roster of women who led the event, I see a roster of who’s who in leadership in San Antonio and beyond. The energy that was unleashed continues to this day in the leadership and service of hundreds of Latinas/Hispanas/Chicanas to our city and nation.

We decided to hold another Hispanas Unidas conference in 1986. By this time we had incorporated as a 501(c)3 and established a board of directors made up of members of MABPW and other women. The founding board was Mary Helen Alvarado, Luz Elena Day, Sr. María Carolina Flores, Lupe Ochoa, and Sylvia Rodríguez. With a totally volunteer effort we continued having the bi-

annual Hispanas Unidas conferences until 1996. That year I left Hispanas Unidas. Janie Barrera and Elise García agreed to join the board and take Hispanas Unidas to another level.

In 1995 with a generous grant from the SBC Foundation, Hispanas Unidas completed a study on Latinas in San Antonio. A major finding was the serious problem of teen pregnancy among Latina girls. Later, under the leadership of Dr. Josie Méndez-Negrete, a curriculum was developed by Hispanas Unidas to establish a program that would create and enhance opportunities for girls ages eight to fourteen. Under the direction of a new board chaired by Dr. Antonia Castañeda and the first executive director for Hispanas Unidas, Susana Lopez, Esq., the Esquelita Program held its first classes in 2000, made possible through a grant from the Kronkowsky Foundation. Named after the *escuelitas* that Mexican women set up in their homes upon arriving in the United States at the turn of the 20th century, the *Escuelita* Program continues to this day under the leadership of Adela Flores, executive director and her board of directors.

My platform as an elected official made it possible for me for an entire decade to make my position of service to many women, their families, and communities. I found that one of the most difficult issues to represent at city hall was help for families. Children are a very fragile lobby but they had powerful advocates such as Dr. Gloria Rodríguez, founder of the AVANCE parenting program, and Rebecca Barrera, owner of Niños Unlimited, Inc. They were two of my strongest collaborators on issues of children and families. We organized women to advocate for their issues.

Another concern that I took to heart concerned equal employment opportunities and upward mobility for Hispanics. There is no better economic development than to give people opportunities with good paying jobs and upward mobility.

Considering the growing number of Hispanics in San Antonio, we were beginning to see fair representation on the city council (well at least one Latina had just been elected), but the faces of the city's workforce did not represent those numbers. The numbers in management were worse. Because of my interest in the issue, Mayor Cisneros appointed me chair of the Equal Employment Opportunity Council Committee. I spent long hours putting together an analysis of Hispanic women in employment within the city. The results were bleak. In this endeavor, I sought the help of Norma E. Cantú, Esq., with the MALDEF Chicana Rights Project. What we found was that most Hispanic women were in the lower clerical jobs and certainly occupied many maintenance positions. Those who fared better got stuck in paraprofessional positions where they might stay for decades, while new management staffers were brought in from outside the city's employment. There were few Hispanic women in supervisory positions and none as department heads. Only City Clerk Norma Rodríguez led a department, but that position is supervised by the city council, not the city manager. After several years we began to see progress in the upward mobility not only of Hispanic women but also Hispanic men.

I made it my business to disseminate information on appointments to boards and commissions so that women could apply. I took advantage of my appointment power to appoint a large number of women, including a majority of Mexican American women, to city boards and commissions.

One of the most valued parts of my service on City Council was my networking with many women as they led organizations and efforts to help empower the community. The following is a list of some of the women leaders and their institutions with whom I had the distinction of collaborating.

Arts

Enedina Cásarez Vásquez, Enearté

Child Care

Rebecca Barrera, Niños Unlimited, Inc.

Communications Union

Gloria Parra, Communication Workers of American (CWA)

Education

Drs. Bambi Cardenas, Ellen Clark, Arcadia Lopez, Berta Perez, Maria Luisa Urdaneta, Ms. Leticia Rodriguez, Helen Austin

Elders Advocate

Alicia Martínez, Prospect Hill

Family Violence Prevention

Patricia Castillo and Jane Shafer, The PEACE Initiative

Head Start

Blanche Russ, Parent Child Incorporated (PCI)

High School for Teens with Special Challenges

Sister Mary Boniface, Healy Murphy School

HIV/AIDS in Women

Selina Cátala and Yolanda Escobar

Homelessness/Transitional Housing for Women and Children

Sisters Dorothy Ettling, Neomi Hayes, Cindy Stacey, and Yolanda Tarango, CCVI: Visitation House Ministries

Immigration

Laura Sanchez and family, Proyecto Hospitalidad

Family Support

Patti Radle, Innercity Development

Leadership Development/Mentoring

Barbie Hernández, Luz Elena Solis Day, MABPW; Adela Flores, MALDEF leadership program

Legal Issues and Equal Employment

Norma E. Cantú, Mary Esther Escobedo, Helen Monica Vasquez

Literacy

Margarita Huantes and Mary Cantu

Media

Martha Tijerina, Maria Elena Torralva, Berta Salazar, Belia Camargo, Veronica Salazar

Municipal Employees

Linda Chavez Thompson, American Federation of State and Municipal Employees (AFSME)

Rosa Rosales, Angie Garcia, Maria Valenzuela, United Public Employees Union (UPEA)

Non-traditional Women Student Support

Dr. Lina Silva, Director, Center for Women, San Antonio College

Parenting

Dr. Gloria Rodríguez, AVANCE

**Public Housing Communities
Outreach/Lincoln Courts**

Rosie Castro, Susan Klein, Elisa Vásquez,
and United Methodist Women

**Small Business and Economic
Development**

Herlinda Cortez Dimas, Carmen
García, Gloria Hernández, Gloria Iruegas
Mackay, Gloria Martínez, Elva Quijano,
Maria Lourdes Ramírez, Leticia Van de
Putte, Santos Viera, Gloria Zamora

Socially Conscious Investment

Sr. Susan Mika, Socially Responsible
Investment Coalition

**Social Justice Issues/Organizing,
Community Venue, Arts**

Graciela Sánchez, Gloria Ramírez,
Esperanza Peace & Justice Center

Women/Family Empowerment

Petra Mata, Viola Cásarez and
compañeras, Fuerza Unida

Women's Networking

Ginger Purdy, Network Power Texas
Luz Escamilla, Choco Meza

**Women's Networking, Education,
Venue**

Jane Shafer, Director, Our Lady of
the Lake Center for Women, Sr. Maria
Carolina Flores, CDP

Workforce Development

Nancy López, Women's Employment
Network; Petra Mata, Viola Casarez,
Fuerza Unida

*Over the years, it was not uncommon
for our city council conference room and
my office to be full of women organizing,
networking, and using their creativity and
energy to empower our community. Our
Latina community—mujeres fuertes y
valientes—took full advantage of this.*