

Isabel Casillas Sánchez, Westside Advocate and Preservationist.

When Isabel Casillas Sánchez passed away on June 14th, just shy of her 97th birthday, we lost our library, an irreplaceable repository of *conocimiento y sabiduría* about all things Westside. We lost our historian, a fount of oral history and knowledge about the forces that shaped the long arc of the 20th century San Antonio neighborhood known as the Westside.

Isabel would never call herself an extraordinary woman, and protested mightily when any of her friends and admirers did so. How could we call her extraordinary? she asked. She was just a Mexican American woman from the Westside, born and raised there, as was her mother before her. Like most mid-20th century women of her generation, she married, was wife to Enrique Sánchez for 78 years, was mother to six children, whom she bore and raised on the Westside, in the house where she and Enrique still lived when she passed away.

What made this dignified, self-possessed and soft-spoken woman so uncommon was her deep and abiding love for the place where she was born and raised. She prized her working-class origins and the cultural roots she inherited from her grandparents, which she and Enrique carefully nurtured and extended through the Westside and beyond for multiple generations.

What Isabel embodied, and with which she treated all she met, were the values of the Westside. As a child, Chavelita, learned that in her community, nobody had much, and that survival depended on caring for one another and sharing whatever one could with persons in need. In a city that has historically disparaged the working-class, largely Mexican-origin population of the Westside, Isabel exemplified those values with an immense pride of place.

Isabel was unstinting in her generosity, was ever kind, compassionate, and gracious. Where others planted hate, Isabel sowed love; where she or someone she knew experienced injustice, she sought out justice. I recall her telling me about places in San Antonio where she did not venture, because people there were hateful about her daughter, Graciela, solely because she is a lesbiana. She neither retaliated nor railed against them. She simply stated that there were places she did not frequent.

Isabel and Enrique worried about and were fearful for Graciela's wellbeing, who as an activist challenged injustice in its myriad forms and structures in San Antonio and was often the object of threats and implied violence. Yet, neither she or Enrique spoke against anti-LGBTQ individuals or groups, or the



Graciela Seanchez, Director of the Esperanza, with her parents Enrique and Isabel celebrating the passage of the Non-Discrimination Ordinance in San Antonio, TX in 2013.

hatemongering they disseminated in radio programs or via print. Instead, with abiding love and justice, they supported Graciela and the Esperanza, lending their inexhaustible cultural knowledge, time, energy and limited resources to the Esperanza's multiple projects and programs. Equally important, in partnership with another Westside family, they established the Sánchez Fuentes College Scholarship Fund in support of Lanier graduates.

My interest in women's history led me to ask Isabel one day about the birth of her children. While I was asking about the difficulty encountered, or not, Isabel chose to talk about the economics of pregnancy and birth. "As soon as I knew I was pregnant," she said, "I started saving my centavitos so that by the time I went to the hospital, we had enough money to pay the doctor and hospital bills. Enrique y yo nunca le debíamos nada a nadie." What Isabel was responding to was the negative

stereotyping of Mexican Americans in

general, and of Westsiders in particular. Like the vast majority of their Westside community, her family were economically responsible San Antonians.

When friends and neighbors began to leave the Westside as job prospects improved, income increased, and housing became more available—following President Truman's desegregation of the military and civil service in 1948—she and Enrique chose to remain. Their families' histories were in the Westside, their ancestral bones buried at San Fernando cemetery. The Northside, did not have the institutions in which they were at home, did not offer the foodstuffs to which they were accustomed, nor the cultural expressions they loved. This was especially so with respect to the music to which they danced at Westside venues or events. Their children attended neighbor schools, and they were active participants in their children's education. The Westside was home, and home it remained for them.

After witnessing the 2002 demolition of La Gloria (built in 1928), a Westside cultural space that hosted wedding dances, quinceañeras, bodas de oro, días de las madres, and other cultural events, in 2009 Isabel joined in the founding of the Westside Preservation Alliance (the WPA), a community-based non-profit preservation organization dedicated to preserving the tangible and intangible heritage of the Westside. More than any of her fellow founders, she knew the meaning of the loss of cultural practices and institutions, of historic structures, including shotgun houses neither designed nor erected by developers, but rather built one

Notas Y Más

September 2021

Community meetings and art events are currently on hold due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Check websites, FB or call 210-228-0201 for virtual meetings and arts programming for each month. www.esperanzacenter.org



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Give to the Esperanza in spirit of solidarity so we can continue to speak out, organize and fight for our communities for another 30 Years. Your support is needed NOW more than ever! Thank you for your gifts!

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And Justice Center**
922 San Pedro Avenue
San Antonio, TX 78212

To sign up as a monthly donor,

Call 210.228.0201 or

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Visit www.esperanzacenter.org/donate for online giving options.

¡Mil Gracias!



The **Latinx Connect Conference**, October 14-16, will provide a virtual space to learn about Latinx

identities, cultures, and contemporary issues. Sponsored by the **University of Pittsburgh**, it is free and open to all. Go to www.diversity.pitt.edu/events/2021-latinx-connect-conference for more information.

SNAP Survivor's Network of those Abused by Priests, meets virtually every 1st and 3rd Tuesday from 7-9pm. Contact **Patti Koo** at 956.648.7385 or snappkoo@gamil.com or **Zac Zepeda** at 210.317.7511 or zzsnap@snapnetwork.org



Trinity University has postponed the **Miraflores** event for September 18th celebrating 100 years

since Dr. Aureliano Urrutia came to San Antonio and created the garden park, **Miraflores**, at the headwaters of the San Antonio River. All other events at Trinity are also on hold.

The **Community Meetings** column usually listed in *La Voz de Esperanza* will be updated and return as soon as COVID abates. Check online for groups you are interested in.



Mujeres La Fuerza de la Lucha/Women Leading the Struggle was the theme for the International Woman's Day March in 2010 that took place in downtown San Antonio. Antonia Castañeda is pictured at left in a white IWD T-shirt and Isabel Sánchez is second from the left in a beret.

room at a time by working men and women with limited or no access to capital or credit.

Isabel knew the history of families and buildings. They were her friends and neighbors; she had attended elementary school with most of them and graduated from Lanier with some of them. Their children had been classmates to Xavier, Fernando, Bernard, Gustavo, Graciela, and Leticia. Along with their neighbors Isabel and Enrique had shopped at Centeno's, gone to the movies at the Guadalupe Theater, danced with them at La Gloria, attended

mass at Guadalupe Church, and joined them at wakes and funerals. Their very being informed the heritage, tangible and intangible of the Westside.

We will miss Isabel at our monthly WPA meetings (on ZOOM). Her knowledge, wisdom, and determination to preserve Westside history, culture, and structures continues to inspire, inform, and guide us. We are ever grateful for her presence among us, for her unshakeable faith in us and in the Westside. We will recall her speaking out at City Council meetings in support of preserving Casa Maldonado, Lerma's, the Malt House, and other historical sites threatened with demolition. Isabel Casillas Sánchez was a Westside preservation advocate. We honor her life, and the struggles she waged with us. She will ever continue to inspire, guide, and remind us that Westside history and culture

matter, and that we must do everything in our power to protect and preserve them. Isabel Casillas Sánchez, PRESENTE!

—Antonia I. Castañeda y el Westside Preservation Alliance.

BIO: Antonia is a Tejana born feminist historian who received her Ph.D. in U.S. History at Stanford University. The author of numerous publications, she is now retired and active in the San Antonio community.