

Graciela Gil Olivarez: Government Official, Attorney, Activist

By Christine Marin. 2009.

Graciela Gil Olivarez was born on May 9, 1928 in Phoenix, but raised in Barcelona, Arizona, a copper mining community that no longer exists due to mining expansion and development near Superior by the Kennecott Copper Corporation, Ray Mines Division, in the mid-1960s. Her parents, Damián Gil Valero and Eloisa Solís Valero, lived in company housing built for mine workers and in neighborhoods segregated by race and ethnicity: Barcelona, for the Spaniards; Sonora, for the Mexicans; and Ray, for the Whites. Company officials kept the groups separate at work and at home in order to discourage friendly alliances among them and to stop any attempts to organize workers into labor unions. The life of an Arizona copper miner in the early 1930s showed little promise of economic stability, and the Great Depression forced families in copper towns to stay and weather the economic storm; or leave their communities to find work elsewhere. Graciela's family chose to stay together in Barcelona, with Damián traveling to Phoenix for occasional work, and Graciela continuing her public school education in Sonora and Ray. With the outbreak of World War II and a new demand for laborers to support the war effort, the family decided to go to Phoenix where Damián knew he could find work.

Although Graciela dropped out of Ray High School at the age of fifteen in 1944, she did not let her lack of a diploma affect her confidence in her abilities to learn new things. She attended Lamson's Business School in Phoenix and soon found work as a stenographer and a translator for a real estate agent. Her work also put her in contact with businessmen at a Spanish-language radio station, KIFN, who recognized Graciela's business and bilingual skills and ease within the Mexican American community. They took her away from the real estate environment and placed her in the world of broadcasting. By 1952, Graciela Gil held a position as the woman's program director of KIFN for the next 14 years, and became locally famous as Phoenix's first female disc jockey and for hosting her radio program, "Action Line." Over time, and through her work, Graciela was exposed to the poverty among those who tuned in to hear her radio program: destitute Mexican and Mexican American families in the migrant labor camps

that surrounded west Phoenix, and those who lived in what was called the “inner city”: south Phoenix.

Graciela began to call attention to the plight of these families in her radio program, but was soon criticized for her commentaries on the air waves by the owners of the radio station, who feared the loss of advertising revenue from conservative sponsors. She was told that her role at the station was not that of a social worker or politician, but that of a disk jockey whose responsibilities were to listeners who expected to hear Latin jazz music or housekeeping and cooking tips for women. But when she had an opportunity to help the poverty-stricken in her Mexican American community, Graciela took it. In 1962, the philanthropist, Robert B. Choate, a member of the prominent Choate family of Massachusetts, initiated the program, “Careers for Youth,” in Phoenix. He asked Graciela to work for him and counsel Mexican and Mexican American families in south Phoenix in finding ways to lower the juvenile delinquency and drop-out rates among Mexican American youths. It was only a matter of time before her work among the poor gained her recognition and success. In 1965, Governor Samuel P. Goddard appointed Graciela as his State Director of the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), and was appointed a year later by President Lyndon B. Johnson as a member of the National Advisory Council on Economic Opportunity, created by the United States Congress and directed by Sergeant Shriver.

The President of Notre Dame University, Reverend Theodore Hesburgh, met Graciela when he served on President Johnson’s Civil Rights Commission, and became familiar with her work among the poor. He encouraged her to return to school and suggested that she attend Notre Dame’s Law School. Although Graciela was already in her late thirties and did not have the educational qualifications to do so, she decided to take the Reverend’s offer seriously. At the age of 42, in 1970, Graciela Gil Olivarez graduated from the Notre Dame School of Law—the first woman and the first Mexican American woman, or Chicana, as she called herself, to do so. With her law degree in hand, and anxious to get to work, Graciela became a law professor at the University of New Mexico from 1973 to 1975. She also served as the first Mexican American woman to sit on the Board of Directors of MALDEF, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund and later its chairperson.

Graciela's efforts to decrease poverty among the poor caught the national attention of high-ranking Democrats. In 1977, President Jimmy Carter appointed her as the Director of the Community Services Administration (CSA) and Graciela became the highest-ranking Mexican American woman in President Carter's administration, a post she held until 1980, when she returned to the Southwest to continue her interest in broadcasting. In Albuquerque, Graciela founded the Olivarez Television Company, Incorporated, the only Spanish-language television network in the country. She continued her work in broadcasting and philanthropy until her death in 1987.

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