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Western women

Western Women: Graciela Olivarez spent life helping less fortunate

By Jan Cleere Special to the Arizona Daily Star Apr 16, 2017

“Amazing Grace” is a term often used to describe Graciela Gil Valero Olivarez, a resourceful woman who went from a life of poverty to standing beside presidents. She was a tenacious volunteer, helping individuals down on their luck regardless of their race, culture, or religion.

Born in Phoenix on March 9, 1928, Graciela spent her childhood in the old mining town of Barcelona, Arizona, which is now part of the town of Kearney. Her father worked as a machinist and her mother gave piano lessons to help support their 5 children.

Dropping out of high school at 15, Graciela continued her education after moving to Phoenix by enrolling in Lamson Business School. Her bilingual skills attracted the attention of a local Spanish-language radio station, KIFN, which hired her as a secretary. She soon worked her way into a broadcasting job becoming the city’s first female disc jockey.

By 1952, Graciela was the women’s program director for the KIFN, a position she held for 14 years. She hosted her own show, “Action Line,” and delved into the inequities rampant throughout the inner-city barrios and among migrant workers in the Hispanic community. The station owners, however, preferred their female disc jockey limit her programming to less controversial issues such as women’s and children’s activities, cooking and music.

During this time, Graciela married. Her son, Victor Rene, was born in 1959, and shortly thereafter, she divorced.

When philanthropist Robert B. Choate initiated the program “Careers for Youth” in Phoenix, Graciela saw an opportunity to work with Mexican-American families in lowering the juvenile delinquency and dropout rates. She counseled families and established a program of after-school study halls to keep students interested in their classwork. She recorded lessons in Spanish for the blind, directed Spanish plays at the Phoenix Little Theater and worked with the Maricopa Council for Retarded Children.

Despite not having a high school diploma, her work with those less fortunate attracted the attention of Arizona Gov. Samuel P. Goddard who appointed Graciela state director of the Office of Economic Opportunity in 1965. A year later, she was on the National Advisory Council on Economic Opportunity, appointed by President Lyndon B. Johnson.

During her tenure on the National Advisory Council, she met the Rev. Theodore Hesburgh, then president of the University of Notre Dame. Hesburg recognized Graciela’s intelligence and concern with racial and cultural issues and encouraged her to return to school and acquire a law degree.

Never one to pass up an opportunity, and despite being a single mother caring for her young son, Graciela enrolled in Notre Dame Law School. Graduating in 1970, she was the first woman to earn a law degree from Notre Dame.

She returned to Arizona as a consultant for the National Urban Coalition and became director of Food for All, managing the community action program to improve federal food initiatives such as food stamps, school lunches, and surplus food distribution.

In 1972, Graciela left Arizona to teach law at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. Three years later, she was appointed director of the New Mexico State Planning Office and that same year, she was named one of “44 Women Who Could Save America” by Redbook magazine.

In an interview she gave at the University of Texas El Paso while serving as New Mexico's Planning Office director, Graciela was asked about her work with the Chicano movement. "My goal has always been to bring my people up to a level where they can make a choice," she said, "... and know what it is that they're choosing."

"The other day somebody accused me of not being a 'typical Mexican.' I asked them why, and they said because I had a good job, and ... I had been successful. This means to me that a typical Mexican is one who fails, and I don't agree with that I think the more you move up, the more secure you become and the more you're able to practice your culture without having to apologize anymore, or without having to hide to use your culture."

As a charter member of the National Organization for Women, founded in 1966, she was often asked her views on women's rights. "The women's movement is ... a movement to acquire rights, which means that you want to be equal with the men, not the same. You've got to learn the difference between being equal and being the same So when

they say, 'Now that you're liberated do you still want me to open the door for you, and light your cigarette, and pick up the tab at the restaurant?' I answer, 'The only door I want opened is the door of opportunity, and I think I can do that myself.'"

In 1977, her work to improve living conditions among the impoverished attracted the attention of President Jimmy Carter, who appointed her director of the Community Services Administration, making her the highest ranking Mexican-American woman in his administration.

In 1980, Graciela returned to Albuquerque and started The Olivarez Television Co., the first Spanish-language television network in the country.

On Sept. 19, 1987, Graciela died in Albuquerque at the age of 59.

Each year, Notre Dame Law School bestows the Graciela Olivarez Award on a Hispanic attorney or judge who is continuing Graciela's "commitment to community service, demonstration of the highest ethical and moral standards, and dedication to justice."

Jan Cleere is the author of several historical nonfiction books about the early people of the Southwest. Email her at Jan@JanCleere.com.

Sources

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