

June 1975

Notre Dame magazine



Amazing Grace

Notre Dame magazine

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Grace Olivarez, a 1970 graduate of the Notre Dame Law School, was the first woman to earn a Notre Dame law degree and is the first woman to be featured on our cover. Assistant Editor John Monczunski's article on Olivarez's life begins on page 16. The cover photograph is by Jim Newkirk; cover design by Don Nelson.





by John Monczunski

The woman's gold and white calling card identifies her as "Directora, Oficina de Planeacion, Estado de Nuevo Mejico." In English, it means Graciela Olivarez '70L heads the state of New Mexico's Office of Planning. And in any language that means she is the highest ranking woman government official in the state and perhaps the entire Southwest.

Grace Olivarez is not yet a household name. But more and more people are beginning to notice Notre Dame's first woman law graduate. One national women's magazine (*Redbook*) recently included her in a list of "44 Women Who Could Save America." Because of her experience, the magazine said she would make an ideal secretary of health, education and welfare. She also was nominated in another magazine (*Lady's Home Journal*) for its "Woman of the Year in Education Award," and Amherst College has awarded her an honorary degree.

Ten years ago if someone would have told her where she would be today, the Chicano woman, who quit high school at 15, would have scoffed at the idea. It's at least a minor miracle; and she is the first to admit it. Grace Olivarez is a most amazing woman, although she won't admit *that*.

"I'm here because there were so many people who laid the plank down when I needed it. It wasn't me. I'm not that bright," she protests. "It was a whole series of people who said, 'Go, you've got a lot to contribute. And so you don't fall in the water, we'll lay the plank down for you.'"

The first plank was a long time in coming, however. The daughter of a Spanish father and a Mexican mother, Grace Olivarez grew up in Sonora, Ariz., a tiny mining town 90 miles southeast of Phoenix.

"I grew up with a very distorted view of myself," she says, recalling her childhood. Language prejudices in grammar school left an indelible impression on the Chicano girl. "Our teachers were Anglos (White Americans). They would patrol the playground and

give tickets to children who dared to speak Spanish. Then the principal would hold court and decide our punishment."

When her family moved to Phoenix, she decided to quit school and go to work. Shortly thereafter the first plank in her life was laid down—or perhaps "fell down" would be more accurate, since the opportunity came about by chance.

She was laid off her first job at the age of 18, but found another as a bilingual secretary in an advertising agency which sold time for a Spanish language program on a local radio station. One day the regular announcer didn't show up and Olivarez found herself on the air. A female announcer was a novelty to the Chicano audience; she was an instant hit, and the old announcer never regained his microphone.

Being a radio personality at that time wasn't easy, she recalls. "I used to go on the air at 4:30 in the morning, get off the air at 7:30, report to the office at 8:30 and work to five o'clock—all for \$150 a month."

A few years later she joined another radio station as women's programming director and stayed at that station for nearly 10 years until she made a decision which altered the course of her life.

In 1962, she was doing an "action line" program for the radio station, which would serve as an ombudsman helping to solve consumer and other problems of listeners who called. In addition, Olivarez was deeply involved in volunteer work with the C.Y.O. and other projects at St. Mark's Catholic Church. The combination of activities placed her in daily contact with people who were suffering the effects of discrimination and gave her a unique view of the extent of the city's civil rights problems.

Consequently, she was asked to testify at a hearing conducted in Phoenix that year by the U.S. Civil Rights Commission. The manager of the radio station objected and told her there were no civil rights problems in Phoenix. He said if she testified otherwise and there was a backlash against her and the station, he would fire her.

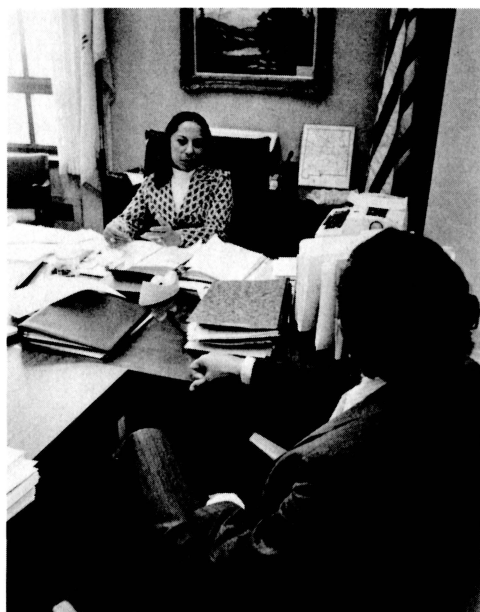
"I thought to myself if I don't testify, then the station will think it's got control of me. So I decided to testify and take the lumps."

Father Hesburgh heard about the incident and made a point of meeting her when the

Amazing Grace Olivarez:

Notre Dame's First Woman Law Graduate Is New Mexico's Highest Ranking Woman in Government

"In five minutes I blurted out all of my frustrations to Father Hesburgh. A few months later I got a letter from him saying, 'Yes, your effectiveness has diminished. You don't have a union card in a union card society.'"



hearings began. They became friends and exchanged notes over the years. The expected backlash never materialized, but the incident soured her feelings for the station and she left soon afterwards to work with the Choate Foundation on a program to keep young people in school. While associated with the foundation, Olivarez also worked on the drafting of legislation which established the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) and, because of her familiarity with the legislation, the governor of Arizona appointed her to head up the office in the state.

A chance meeting with Father Hesburgh at Chicago's O'Hare International Airport four years later led to the laying of another plank in her life. "We both were on our way to a White House Conference. Although I was serving as director of the Arizona Office of Economic Opportunity, I was becoming frustrated because I was beginning to see that my effectiveness was diminishing.

"In five minutes I blurted out all of my frustrations to Father Hesburgh. A few months later I got a letter from him saying, 'Yes, your effectiveness has diminished. You carry no credibility because you have no credentials. You don't have a union card in a union card society.' He said the University was willing to waive all entrance

requirements for law school if I was willing to give three years of my life. He told me that Notre Dame would pay my tuition the first year and give me a thousand-dollar stipend if I kept my grades up, but he warned I would receive no special treatment once I got to the University.

"My first reaction was, oh, no, I don't want my edges filed. My second reaction was they say anyone can make it in this country if they want to, and my third reaction was, I'm chicken and that's why I'm rationalizing.

"My friends said, 'Grace, this is probably a first in legal education—going to law school without a high school diploma or undergraduate work. So I thought, well, if Father Hesburgh thinks I can do it, maybe I can. I worked two jobs for the next six months, accumulated \$5,400, packed my eight-year-old son and one nephew and, set up house in apartment L-11 of University Village."

Law student Olivarez, who was divorced, quickly found she had her hands full as a full-time student and mother. "I honestly didn't realize how much work it would be when I came here. With a son and a nephew to take care of, I had to do the cooking and the packing of lunches, the driving to the bus stop, the grocery shopping and housecleaning—and then if I had time I studied."

Domestic duties didn't slow her down. While a student, she managed to keep her grades up, serve as a panelist at the White House Conference on Food, Nutrition and Health, help organize a conference for Midwestern and Southwestern Mexican-Americans at Notre Dame and hold consulting positions with the National Urban Coalition and the National Commission on Household Employment.

She also found time to lead campaigns for women's rights at Notre Dame. In 1967, women graduate students were not allowed to swim in the Notre Dame pool, the Athletic and Convocation Center lacked locker facilities for women, and women were banned from the University golf course. Olivarez served as legal counsel to the women's group on campus and during her last year of law school testified before the University Board of Trustees' committee on student affairs that such treatment was unconstitutional and embarrassing in the home of Father Hesburgh, then chairman of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission. Within a few months, the Uni-

versity dropped its ban on women golfers and started building lockers for women at the pool and the ACC.

In May of 1970, Olivarez earned her union card. Accompanied by applause from the audience, she ran up the steps of the Library Auditorium stage and received her degree, becoming the first woman graduate of the University of Notre Dame Law School.

After graduation, she returned to Phoenix and planned to begin a law practice among the poor. But another series of events intervened and now she doubts she will ever practice law.

"When I went back to Phoenix I found that I had missed the review course for the bar exam and the reality hit me that I couldn't afford to sit back and wait to take it when it was next offered. I needed a job to pay my debts, and because of my family, I needed it like that," she said, snapping her fingers.

She began working as a consultant to the Urban Coalition, but resigned after five months because the job required constant commuting between Washington, D.C. and Phoenix. She then accepted the position of director of Food for All, a program to increase distribution of food stamps to those who need them. "Once I got into the administrative bag again, I realized how much more effective I could be as an administrator with a background in law. I decided I would probably never practice law because I'm happy in what I'm doing."

Being inactive isn't in her nature. Long involved in the civil rights movement and Mexican-American causes she continued her activity and also became a well-known advocate of women's rights in Arizona.

Today, she says she identifies more with the Equal Rights Amendment movement than the total women's movement because "I don't agree with the movement's stand on abortion.

"In fact, I think it's contrary to everything the women's movement should stand for. Even if you were to take away all of

"To me abortion is 180 degrees opposite of what I thought the women's movement was all about. I'm most concerned about other issues, such as employment, admittance to school, promotions and freedom of choice. A woman should be able to choose to be a housewife or professional woman without being criticized one way or the other."

the moral implications, I would be against abortion. It places all of the responsibility on the woman. She must take the risk of the aftereffects and the moral responsibility. In essence, it really tells a man he doesn't have to worry because a woman can always have an abortion.

"To me abortion is 180 degrees opposite of what I thought the women's movement was all about. I'm most concerned about other issues, such as employment, admittance to school, promotions and freedom of choice. A woman should be able to choose to be a housewife or professional woman without being criticized one way or the other."

As vice chairman of the Presidential Commission on Population Growth and the American Future, Olivarez was one of two members to oppose the commission's recommendation in 1972 that the country's abortion laws be relaxed. She and Dr. Paul B. Cornerly charged that the commission did not give serious enough consideration to the moral and religious issue and that it rushed to hasty conclusions with weak statistics.

The next plank in Grace Olivarez's life came from a group of Chicano professors at the University of New Mexico. The director of the university's Institute for Social Research and Development's (ISRAD), a former governor of the state, retired in 1972 and the professors wanted Olivarez to apply for the job.

"I told them, 'No I really don't want to leave Phoenix and they said apply, just so the university gets used to the idea of Chicanos and women applying."

"The University asked for my resume and had me in for two days of interviews. They ended up offering me the position, which included a full professorship with tenure within two years."

ISRAD, which is charged with mobilizing the service function of the university, was in an administrative, political and budgetary mess, and the idea of making it more effective appealed to her. She took the job and became the highest ranking woman administrator in the University of New Mexico. Within a year, Olivarez had the institute in a healthy condition and had made peace with the state legislature, which had been suspicious of ISRAD and had been determined to close it down.

Olivarez was doing what she wanted to do: working to have the university help the people of the state. She had a good job, one with tenure. This could have been the end of the story. But it's not.

The president of the university, who supported the institute, announced he was leaving last year, and Olivarez said she found almost immediately that ISRAD was not getting the institutional support it needed, and she began to think about leaving. Meanwhile, on January 15, newly elected Gov. Jerry Apodaca offered her the position of director of the state planning office, and she took him up on it.

Although the job is considered to be a political plum and one that has launched several political careers, Olivarez told the governor when she accepted the position that she was interested only in professionalizing the office and not in politics.

As director, she is in charge of a 62-person office which is responsible for reviewing long-range and short-range planning for all New Mexico state agencies. The office serves in an advisory capacity to the governor and is responsible for conducting research for cabinet meetings, maintaining the cabinet's agenda, and other duties of a secretariat.

Keeping on top of this is more than a full-time job, and Olivarez works at least a 12-hour day to stay abreast. Each weekday morning the planning director gets up at 5:30. After a traditional glass of orange juice, laced with cod liver oil to ease her tendonitis, she has breakfast with her son and drives 90 miles from her home in Albuquerque to her office in Santa Fe. The day usually is taken up with meetings and appointments with everyone from state senators to job seekers.

At five o'clock each night, Olivarez and her two top aides (who are men), have a half hour debriefing and go over any unsolved problems which have occurred during the day. She usually leaves the office by 8 p.m. and gets home at 9:30 in time to "have supper, do a few push-ups and knee bends and go to bed."

As if her normal workload weren't enough, she works voluntarily with the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, the Fund for the Improvement of Post-secondary Education, the Council on Foundations, and the American Bar Association. She also is on the national board of the American Civil Liberties Union and the University of Notre Dame Civil Rights Center Advisory Board. On



Saturdays, she hosts a two-hour Spanish radio show—just for the fun of it.

In spite of her many professional activities, Olivarez does not sacrifice her home life. She jealously guards the time she spends with her family. "When I come home from work," she says, "I leave my professional life in a little brown bag at the doorstep, and when I go to work I leave my domestic life in another brown bag outside the office."

A warm and outgoing person, the planning office director contends there is a side of her that often is overlooked. "You know, I'm not just an administrator. I like to cook and do crewel and embroidery, but rarely does that ever come out."

How does she see her own future? Olivarez was approached to go into politics as early as 1970, but she can't see herself on the campaign trail. "To be honest, the only way I would get into politics is if someone appointed me to a term that was about to expire," she says. Some politicians and *Redbook* magazine would like to see her in Washington as the first woman secretary of health, education and welfare, but Olivarez would rather stay in New Mexico and work on problems there.

However, she says her personal philosophy is never plan too far ahead—just take things a day at a time.