Lucy Acosta’s Legacy Continues in LULAC

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A local discussion concerning the League of United Latin American Citizens, or LULAC, is inevitably followed by the name Lucy Acosta. Dubbed the “Iron Lady of El Paso” by LULAC legal counsel, this diminutive powerhouse is known for co-founding and spearheading Project Amistad, transforming it into a multimillion dollar non-profit organization that aids the elderly and disabled. In a March 2010 interview with the Borderlands student editor, her son Alejandro Acosta Jr. revealed another side of one of El Paso’s most distinguished civil activists. “They [people] saw her as this hard charger... we saw her as mom.”

Maria Angela Socorro Grijalva was born in the small copper mining town of Miami, Ariz., in 1926. According to a 1982 oral history interview with Mario T. Garcia, history and Chicano studies professor at the University of California, Santa Barbra, her father began calling her “Lucy,” a form of his mother’s name, Luciana, because he did not like any of her given names.

When she was three, a mining accident claimed the life of her father. The Depression closed the mines and families were forced to find jobs elsewhere. Acosta told Garcia in the interview that when she was six, her family moved to an apartment on the corner of Sixth and El Paso Streets, where she lived until she married. The family was better off than most. The pension received from the death of her father allowed the family to survive the Depression and enabled Lucy to attend school full-time, unlike many of her friends and neighbors.

According to her son, it was during her years at Bowie High School that Lucy was first “bitten” by the public service bug. She knew that higher educational opportunities were not possible for most of her fellow students, many of whom had to drop out to help support their families. Lucy became heavily involved in coordinating student activities and events in an effort to make high school a positive, memorable experience for all Bowie Bears. Her dedication to her classmates earned her the nickname “Mama Bear.”

Excelling in academics, Acosta graduated from Bowie High School in 1943 in the top ten percent of her class and began a relationship with her friend and childhood playmate, Alejandro Acosta. Prospects for higher education were slim for Alejandro, an orphan raised by his older brother, and the Selective Service Board quickly drafted him to fight in World War II.

According to Latinas in the United States: A Historical Encyclopedia, while Alejandro completed his tour of duty, Lucy Grijalva attended International Business College, from which she graduated in 1945. Following graduation, she held clerical positions, and in 1947, the love of her life returned and the couple married in 1948. Only a few days after the birth of their first son, the draft returned to claim Acosta’s husband for duty in Korea.

After Korea and with the aid of the GI Bill, the Acostas purchased their first and only home at 4402 Leeds Ave. Life wasn’t always easy with both parents working and sharing one car, but they managed well with the aid of an extended family living within a three-block radius. With an unwavering united front, the Acostas taught their sons, Alex Jr. and Daniel, the power of an education. The two learned that their parents expected them to be successful, but to be remarkable, they had to aid those less fortunate in the community.

“They rode us hard,” Alex Jr. stated. His mother was known for her iron will, “but they [people in the community] couldn’t possibly have experienced was her compassion and the love... her ability to pick you up and dust you off, and to send you back in there.” The boys were taught never to give up and not to use excuses for failures.

Although life was busy, Acosta still managed to devote her time to others by staying active with her alma mater. Then, in 1957, the catalyst for Acosta’s career came when she officially joined LULAC.

The first item on the agenda for Acosta was to help organize and co-found LULAC Ladies Council No. 335. Designed to increase membership of women in their 30s to represent the younger Hispanic community, the council began programs to provide holiday dinners and baskets for the Home for Aged Women and gifts for needy children, as well as to hold clothing drives and offer scholarships to deserving students. This group of women also started another project that would ultimately become a powerful voice throughout the Hispanic community: voter registration drives.

Coinciding with the birth of Ladies Council No. 335 was the mayoral election of Raymond Telles. Inspired by the possibility of El Paso’s first Hispanic mayor, Acosta and the ladies council went door to door registering voters in South El Paso. As most could not afford to pay the poll tax, Acosta and other members held fundraisers in front of department stores.

The effort was an enormous success, and in recognition of her efforts, Acosta was appointed a liaison to Telles’ administration. Thus began Acosta’s 29 years of leadership as a liaison to every subsequent mayor of El Paso.

Although the door was open for her to enter politics, according to her son Alex, that was never a temptation. Being filled with compassion for the plight of the less fortunate and having a belief that doing good was its own reward, Acosta stayed active with LULAC and developed a very long and distinguished career.

Over the decades, Acosta held every office in the local chapter including five times as president of Ladies Council No. 335 and chairman of the scholarship committee. She served as National Director of Youth Activities and went to the top as National Vice President. Acosta was responsible for organizing and co-founding many organizations, including LULAC Youth Council 26, but it was co-founding and working as executive director of Project Amistad that developed her reputation as a lady with an iron will.

As Acosta’s parents began to age and were unable to drive, simple chores like grocery shopping and paying the bills became impossible. According to her son, Acosta was driven to help meet the needs of those with no family to assist, and in 1976, Project Amistad (based on the Spanish word meaning “friendship”) was born. With Acosta at the helm for 25 years, what began as a few women using their personal cars grew into a region-wide assistance program providing transportation, financial management and even guardianship for the elderly.

With the steadfast support of her husband, which, according to her son, was a secret to Acosta’s success, this amazing woman managed to serve the community through working with organizations such as the Bowie Alumni Board of Directors, El Paso County Child Welfare Board, El Paso County General Assistance Agency, El Paso Electric Company Consumer Advisory Council, El Paso Del Norte Food Bank, El Paso Parks and Recreation Board, El Paso Women’s Political Caucus, LULAC’s Fiesta de las Flores, Leadership El Paso, National Hispanic Council on Aging, Parent Teacher Association, Paso del Norte Development Corp., Project Bravo, Society of Professionals on Aging, St. Joseph’s Catholic Parish, Sun Carnival Association, United Way, Visiting Nurses Association and many others.

Acosta’s concern and compassion also led her down the road of many firsts. In 1972, she was the first woman in El Paso appointed Civil Service Commissioner. Acosta was the first woman inducted into the national LULAC Hall of Fame (1979), and she was the first woman and layperson to be appointed to the 17th District Bar Association of Law Examiners. She was also the first recipient of the J. C. Machuca Award as President of the Year for LULAC District Four in 1980, and in 1982, she was the first recipient of the United Way Annual Volunteer Service Award. She became the first Hispanic woman to serve on the El Paso Community College Board of Trustees, and when her husband returned to school and graduated from El Paso Community College, Acosta presented his diploma to him.

If Acosta’s list of contributions seems endless, so does a list of her awards. Some of her more prestigious awards include: Outstanding LULAC Woman in the Nation for 1963 and 1973; 1972 Gold Medallion for outstanding civic participation in El Paso; 1972 LULAC Outstanding Citizen; 1972 Outstanding Ex-student of Bowie High; 1977 LULAC Council 335 Woman of the Year; 1978 LULAC Outstanding President of Texas; Texas Women’s Hall of Fame 1987; and El Paso Commission on Women’s Hall of Fame. Lucy Acosta Way, a street on the east side of El Paso, is also named for her.

On March 8, 2008, El Paso lost one of its greatest humanitarians. In an El Paso Times article, former El Paso County Democratic Party Chairwoman Queta Fierro spoke of Acosta’s accomplishments. “She was always so dedicated... I loved her to pieces.”

Acosta’s memory is honored by the annual LULAC Lucy G. Acosta Humanitarian Awards, as well as by the hundreds of elderly and disabled that are assisted every day by Project Amistad. With Acosta’s granddaughter Andrea now on the board, the project continues the legacy of “El Paso’s Iron Lady.”