In 1936, Welch studied architecture and related subjects at the University of Chicago. In 1937, Mabel Welch began studying with George Washington Smith of Santa Barbara, the foremost authority on Spanish Colonial Revival architecture in California and credited for that state’s love affair with the style. She also studied Spanish architecture in Mexico City and San Antonio. In 1939, the Society of American Registered Architects admitted Mabel Welch, El Paso’s first woman so honored.

The first expensive Spanish style home that Welch built was at 3100 Gold Ave. for the Paul Harvey family. With walls two feet thick, as many as five layers of tile on the roof, heavy wooden beams to support the tile, and ironwork made to look old, the house caused Welch to hire Mexican artisans to produce many of the Spanish techniques, as American workers did not have the needed skills. Welch writes in her autobiography that she hired a Mexican wood carver to carve the faces of the Harvey children on the ceiling beams of the living room and other decorations throughout the home.

Welch also built huge homes on Rim Road for prominent families, including A. B. Poe, J. P. Kemp and F. P. Schuster, whose house was designed not in Spanish style but English Norman, based on ideas the building was at 3100 Gold Ave. for the Paul Harvey family. With walls two feet thick, as many as five layers of tile on the roof, heavy wooden beams to support the tile, and ironwork made to look old, the house caused Welch to hire Mexican artisans to produce many of the Spanish techniques, as American workers did not have the needed skills. Welch writes in her autobiography that she hired a Mexican wood carver to carve the faces of the Harvey children on the ceiling beams of the living room and other decorations throughout the home.

Welch built a number of large homes after World War II on Gold Avenue, Silver Street and Frankfort Avenue. She also became a real estate broker and bought older homes to remodel and sell.

While excelling in her career, Welch raised her son, who became an electrical engineer, and spent much of his life working with the nation’s space and guided missile programs. She was active in the Women’s Division of the Chamber of Commerce for decades, influencing many businesses to build in Mediterranean style.

The stunning mansion at 939 Rim Rd., originally built for Dr. Frank Schuster is one of the few homes Welch designed in a style other than Mediterranean. (Photo by Javier Medina Jr.)

This home at 2619 Altura Ave. features a supporting beam taken from the old Santa Fe Street Bridge to Juárez. (Photo by Elizabeth Torres)

The home at 3038 Federal Ave. was featured in a book used at Yale University for many years. (Photo by Javier Medina Jr.)

The home at 3101 Gold Ave. was built in 1952. (Photo by Elizabeth Torres)

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In 1943, Welch and several other members of the Women’s Division of the El Paso Chamber of Commerce took a goodwill tour of Chihuahua City, about 220 miles south of El Paso, to study the city’s Spanish architecture and the regulations that kept that city so clean and inviting. Welch came back with many ideas to incorporate into her own designs. This goodwill tour also created a bond with Mexico, and it was such a success that the El Paso Chamber invited the Chihuahuan women to visit later that year.

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In 1959, Mabel Welch became a Fellow in the Society of American Registered Architects in recognition of her long and distinguished career. She built more than 800 homes in West Texas, New Mexico and Northern Mexico. Many of them were in Manhattan Heights, a historical district at the base of the Franklin Mountains in Central El Paso.

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The Moocher: Callie Fairley, First Woman Vice Detective in El Paso

By Rachel Murphree

Look out, here comes the Moocher!” The whispers would fly when petite Callie Fairley came around. Why did it because she carried a heavy pistol in her purse? Was she a vagrant, begging for food money? No, her “mooching” was always on behalf of girls “in trouble,” and it was her quiet, determined demeanor that would make policemen and businessmen alike honor her request. El Paso’s first woman vice detective would ask any policeman she saw for a dollar to help the runaways in El Paso from other areas of the country and women she picked up on charges of prostitution. Businessmen were generous with donations to her superiors, who would see the money was used to help runaway girls.

Callie Fairley retired at age 70, after 27 years of work cleaning up El Paso and bettering the lives of prostitutes. While not the first woman on the police force, she was its first detective and its best known.

Fairley didn’t start out to become a police detective. She found many ways to support her family, but her longest running career was police work. According to a 1963 Herald Post article, Callie Griffin was born in Colorado in 1881, to a father in the freight business and a mother with scars from an Indian ambush. She suffered as a child in her family’s journey west from Illinois. When Callie was three, the family moved to New Mexico, and she and her eight siblings learned about hard work and honesty.

A widow with two young daughters, she arrived in El Paso in 1907, as she put it, “just a country girl.” Work was hard to find for a woman in those days, so she started a dining room in a boarding house that catered to convaleesants. With the help of one maid, she cooked three meals a day for 27 people, and soon her reputation spread, bringing diners from the outside. She later trained to be a practical nurse, she was soon well loved and highly in demand.

In 1916, she married Lester Fairley, a steel construction foreman, a man with whom she shared many interests, including dancing. Soon they moved to Alabama for Mr. Fairley to work on the Muscle Shoals Project. Callie was a volunteer nurse there during the flu epidemic of 1918 until her husband contracted the disease. He became an invalid for years, and after only a year, she was asked to join the City Police Department. She was not a jail matron or secretary, the usual jobs open to women in police work at that time, but a certified city detective, the first, and for decades, the only woman to hold such a post in El Paso. After a career that saw many societal changes, she retired in 1952 as head of the three-member vice squad and at 70, the oldest working member of the police department.

Callie’s predecessor on the force, Ida Newton, got her start during World War I. Then Ida Vinson, she was a widow with five children and became El Paso’s first policewoman. She passed the Civil Service exam with high marks, and while two of her sons went off to war, she started 27 years of police work on the “homewardbound.” Armed only with a billy club, she arrested women hiding narcotics. She was also jail matron and later aided in vice raids. The aims of both Fairley and Newton were to rid the city of prostitution and get the women out of that life and back into respectability. The two early policewomen are pictured on this page along part of the force they served with—all men.

When soldiers returned from World War I, they helped change the values of the country. Many were already familiar with the more liberal attitudes toward sex overseas. Prohibition, the mass availability of automobiles, the emergence of jazz and check-to-check dancing in popular culture changed society forever.

The city wrestled with how to legislate morality and deal with prostitution, especially with the high rates of venereal disease of soldiers at Fort Bliss and civilians alike. City leaders tried and retired various methods of dealing with prostitution, including fines, a “Zone of Tolerance,” having the girls maintain health cards with weekly medical checkups and licensing only certain establishments to be in business. The city would run cleanup drives for decades.

Callie Fairley was a central figure in the drives to clean up the city. In The Gentlemen’s Club, Gordon Frost wrote that Fairley was “often referred to as El Paso’s ‘one­woman police force’” and a “near-legendary figure in El Paso law enforcement.” He went on to say, “During her twenty-five-year career, the diminutive officer arrested more than 20,000 women, a record which any career officer would be proud to own.”

In 1931, Fairley was put in charge of the newly established Police Department Welfare Bureau whose responsibility it was to look after the women entering prostitution because of the hardships of the Depression. At the end of that year, Callie submitted her first Welfare Bureau report showing that 331 hotels and houses were inspected, 999 girls interviewed and 500 found to have venereal disease. More than 90 percent of these contacts were made by Fairley in addition to her full-time work as a vice detective.

In a 1950 El Paso Times article, she spoke of several attacks she suffered, from men and women. “I never backed off and I was never afraid. ... If you never show fear you will never get hurt — that is the way a woman should always feel and she will never be harmed.”

In a 1963 El Paso Historical Society meeting discussing early law enforcement, Fairley said, “I was solo; I didn’t have a partner. Once in a while I kinda felt like I might need it [her gun], but didn’t have to use it.” Fairley noted that she wouldn’t have had to carry a gun had it not been for the “gentlemen friends” of the prostitutes who sometimes tried to take the girls’ side when Callie attempted to arrest them.

Fairley often felt that the runaway girls didn’t need punishment as much as they needed aid and direction to get them back home to their families. Frost compiled comments from those who knew her. An ex-madam said, “She was always fair with us and seemed to understand more about us and our jobs than anyone else.” A former prostitute said, “I knew she was there to help, not hurt me. She was more like a mother than a cop.”

A retired public health nurse remembers, “She was overjoyed, often using her own money to buy bus tickets to send wayward girls home, thinking it would save them from a life of vice. Those girls who wouldn’t pay any attention to Callie’s advice and generosity soon found themselves in jail, though.” At four-foot-nine-inches, Detective Fairley was an institution in the city.

Fairley’s good friend and Salvation Army worker, Mrs. John A. Warren, better known as “Mother” Warren, paid for a room by the month at a downtown hotel which Fairley used to house a girl that she felt was “worth the while,” and they would feed her until they had enough money to send her back home. Fairley said of their partnership: “We had right here in this city young ladies — that is they are grandmothers now — that is we interviewed and through Mother Warren and I they have lovely homes, girls, and college, and they are doing fine so you feel like you have had some success.”

After her retirement, Fairley spent another lively 14 years working with the Pilot Club, a professional women’s social service organization, as their president and matron of their “Home for Aged Gentilefolk,” as well as with other civic groups. In 1963, she was chosen Mother of the Year by the Junior Woman’s Club. She enjoyed crocheting but also traveling in two-seater planes and jets, ever active in retirement as in younger years. She died in 1965 at age 84.

In the 1965 panel discussion she said, “Allow me to say that the officials of both the county and the city, if they could dodge me, they did, but they never met me face to face and refused [to give money]. So I could always manage to get fare and enough for [the girls] to eat on such as a hamburger, coffee or something until they got home. Sometimes you heard from the parents of the girls and you felt you had done some good.” And she had. The lives of many women were improved because of the kindness, hard work and resourcefulness of “The Moocher,” Detective Callie Fairley.
Myrna Deckert Remains Modest about Achievements

By Diana Holguin and Heather Coons

For most members of El Paso's business community, this featured trailblazer needs no introduction. Not only is her name synonymous with the YWCA, but her descriptions and accomplishments are legendary. She is a natural leader. She is businesswoman extraordinaire: Myrna J. Deckert.

Deckert was born in McPherson, Kansas. As a child, she moved to the San Joaquin Valley in California with her family. She grew up with her two siblings, and later attended San Jose State College and the University of the Sequoias, but it was the education she received at home from her father that carried her on to success.

Deckert adored her father. Jeanne McCarty, her friend and colleague, said in an article in The Journal, "When Mike was younger, someone asked him what his parents did for a living. He said I worked for the phone company, I was on the phone so much." According to McCarty, "Work - Work With - and YWCA Chairwoman. Deckert also spent three years involved with the Paso Del Norte Group, in an effort to revitalize downtown.

During all these many projects and challenges, Deckert earned her MBA from the University of Beverly Hills in 1983. Add her husband, Ray, and her children, Shelly, Kim, Charles and Michael, and the countless foster children that Deckert brought into her home over the years, and one could only imagine her hectic schedule. In her interview with Viescas, Deckert chuckled, recalling how busy she was.

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But the greatest turning point and challenge in her life, according to Deckert, was her diagnosis with cancer in the early 1970s. In March 1995, Deckert told the El Paso Times that her diagnosis brought her face to face with her mortality. "It became very important to me to make my life make a difference."

The difference Deckert's life has made is witnessed by her many accolades and awards. In 1973, Deckert received the Hannah Solomon Award from the American Association of University Women. In 1975, Deckert was named the El Paso Women's Commission Hall of Fame. In 1980, Deckert was the recipient of LULAC Council 617's Community Service Award. La Mujer Hispana gave her the award of Merit in 1986. In 1990, the National Association of YWCA Executives named Deckert the Executive Director of the Year, and in 1991 she received the national YWCA's Edith M. Larrigo Award.

Deckert is a member of the El Paso Women's Commission Hall of Fame, and she was inducted into the El Paso County Historical Society's Hall of Honor in 1993. In 2003, the local YWCA established the Myrna J. Deckert Lifetime Achievement Award, and Deckert was the first recipient. But the true testimony of the difference she has made is in the changed lives of countless women, children and families throughout the El Paso community.

Today, Deckert's demanding schedule has slowed down some, allowing her time for her favorite things, like reading, eating chocolate ice cream and catching some time on the golf course with her nine grandchildren, but the word "retirement" isn't in her vocabulary. As the current CEO of Paso Del Norte Health Foundation, she is a staying power within the El Paso business community. As for tips on success, she emphasizes having a sense of humor, hiring people smarter than you are, taking risks, listening and having fun.

But one key to her success, according to Deckert, is staying out of public politics. There have been occasions when she has contributed to opposing candidates running for an office, but, according to the 1995 El Paso Times interview, that doesn't mean she's neutral on the issues. "From a political point of view, I try to stay real straight on this - I do not support political individuals publicly," Deckert stated.

El Paso is lucky that it got under her skin all those years ago. Myrna Deckert is still one of this city's hardest working professionals and she sees no reason to "retire" again as she already did twice. Her own mother worked until she was 85, after all. No, this is one superstar who will continue to shine for a long, long time.
Alicia R. Chacón Came to Politics Naturally

By Carlos Cantu, Polo Eduardo Frescas, Michael Diaz and Heather Coons

Many people in El Paso have helped pave the way for others to follow: some in medicine, others in business, even more in education. But one woman stands alone for leading the way for Chicanos and women in politics—Alicia R. Chacón.

Chacón was born on Nov. 11, 1938, to William and Jessicita Rosencrans, the third of seven children. She was just a toddler, when her father was elected constable in their little town of Canutillo. But the family would be separated from their father when he was drafted to fight in World War II.

Chacón remembers the three years her father was away as a developing period for the family. She told Dr. José Gutiérrez in an interview for Tejano Voices that those were happy years, even though her mom was a strict disciplinarian. “I always remember... how strong my mother was.”

After her father’s return, the family moved from Chacón’s hometown of Canutillo to Ysleta, and it was there that she attended high school. Chacón’s favorite subjects were history, government and geography, and she was very active in the Catholic Youth Organization. She participated in public speaking for the 4-H Club, and through it she met an Extension Agent who would become a good friend and help set the course of Chacón’s life in politics: Elkie Mentor.

After gaining permission from Chacón’s mom for the young girl to travel with the 4-H Club, Mentor set out to show her the state. Chacón went to Austin to see the capital and San Antonio where they visited Breckenridge Zoo and the Sunken Gardens. They traveled to Corpus Christi and Port Arthur because Mentor wanted Alicia to learn about places outside of El Paso. Chacón told Gutiérrez, “Mentor always thought I had leadership qualities.”

That was in the early 1950s, and discrimination and segregation were alive and well, but, according to Chacón, Mentor attempted to shield her from that as best she could. “She would go into the hotels... and sometimes we wouldn’t stay there. I know now... that it was because they had policies that they didn’t allow Mexicanos. She [Mentor] never let on.”

During high school, Chacón took several jobs to help provide for her family. She babysat and tutored neighborhood children and worked as a sales clerk downtown. Only about half of Chacón’s grade school friends went to high school, and few who graduated from high school had any expectation of going to college. After graduation, Chacón took a clerical position with the Humane Society in 1957. There she met her husband, Joe, and two years later they were married.

Ten months after their marriage, Chacón’s first child, Carlos, was born. Woodrow Bean, a friend of her father’s, had been elected county judge and hired Alicia as an administrative assistant to the manager at the El Paso County Courthouse. In quick succession, Chacón’s daughter, Coreen, was born, and then her son, Sammy, who was named after Chacón’s boss and management mentor, Sam Cohen.

Chacón and her husband had worked for Ralph Yarborough’s bid for governor in 1957 while she was still in high school. In 1960, she campaigned for John F. Kennedy as part of a Viva Kennedy Club. In 1968, a local group of Democrats approached Chacón and asked her to run for the state executive committee. As the committeewoman from El Paso, she would help organize and run the party, and in 1968, Chacón was the first Mexican-American to be elected to that position.

At this time, George McAlmon, the elected county chair of the Democratic Party in El Paso, approached Chacón to manage the first office designed to handle the daily work for the party. Chacón agreed, and during the four years that she maintained that position, she learned the election code inside out and became more knowledgeable about politics.

Although Chacón was busy in the political arena, she was an active mother with her children’s school and local PTA. The Ysleta school buildings were very old and had deteriorated terribly by the late 1960s, and overhead pipes that used steam to heat the buildings would break, endangering the safety of the students.

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In 1974, while still serving on the school board, Chacón was elected as the first woman to serve as county clerk in El Paso. Then, in 1978, she chose not to run for reelection when she was appointed by President Jimmy Carter to become the first Mexican-American woman to serve as the regional director for the Small Business Administration. That same year, she was one of 100 Americans appointed by Secretary of State Cyrus Vance to serve on the United States Commission to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in an effort to promote world unity and eliminate racism. In 1983, Chacón was the first Mexican-American woman to be elected to the El Paso City Council, where she served for two terms.

Chacón took a brief retirement from politics to tour the country with her ailing father in 1988. After returning home, she went on to become the first Mexican-American woman to be elected judge in a major urban Texas county. After one term as county judge, her political career ended abruptly in 1994 when she lost her bid for reelection.

In a 1996 interview with El Paso Inc., Chacón attributed her defeat to the lack of supporter turnout. “I think a lot of my friends and supporters took it for granted that I would win,” Chacón explained. “The loss was very narrow.”

After a brief period “on hold,” Chacón was named director of the United Way in 1996, where she hoped to develop a strategic three-year plan in setting financial goals for the future. Chacón believed that her past work with charity volunteer organizations like Family Services of El Paso, the Trinity Coalition, Community Chest and Another Way would help open doors for her new occupation. Some United Way board members opposed her appointment, supposedly because she lacked a college degree, and effective changes were difficult to put in place.

However, the lack of a college degree did not prevent Chacón from being inducted into the Texas Women’s Hall of Fame in 1986, or from having a school in El Paso named in her honor. At Alicia Chacón Elementary, students are educated in both English and Spanish and have the opportunity to learn other languages, like German and Japanese.

As the owner of La Tapatia, Inc., a local Mexican food factory, Chacón has retired from politics, giving only the occasional advice to friends. And when asked by the Borderlands student editor how she felt about the progress of women in politics, Chacón voice filled with admiration. “It is everything we had worked so hard for. I am so proud. Locally, we don’t recognize our people, but there are good leaders out there, like family court judge Patricia Macias.”

In her retirement, it is the volunteers who supported her that she reflects on most. “Whole families supported me: mothers, fathers, the children. I never would have been elected without them. They gave me their trust as a public servant, and I am so grateful to have served El Paso.”

With this attitude and her knowledge of how bureaucracy and politics work, Alicia Chacón could very well teach younger generations a thing or two about how to get elected to office. Today there may be less overt attention to gender and ethnicity in elections, but these aspects are always there, underlying a major that minorities during the early 1970s. As a reform candidate running for election to sit on an all-Anglo school board, Chacón knew the chances for success were slim. While other Mexican-Americans had run for the Ysleta school board, they had never won. With a list of registered voters in hand, she began a quiet campaign going door to door, and when the tallies were in, Chacón proved victorious.

During Chacón’s first term on the board, opposition was heavy. In fact, the board didn’t even want to announce her as the winner of the election. But by her second term in 1973, a second Mexican-American had been elected, and changes were made in the district’s hiring policies, demanding more qualified personnel. Renovation of buildings began, and strict rules against racism were enforced.

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country. Its population was young, 20.8 years, and its major industry was clothing manufacturing, employing more than 10,000 workers, many with young children. The YWCA began working with other agencies to help young women and mothers. The program was funded by federal, state and private grants. Kay McIntyre retired in 1969, and taking her place was Myrna Deckert, who would hold the position of Executive Director of El Paso’s YWCA until 2002. Deckert began to work diversifying the membership of the board of directors and staff, and among the first Hispanic women on the board were Rosa Guerrero, Leticia Paez, and Rosa Gonzalez. Susan Melendez, former board member and current YWCA El Paso Foundation trustee, reflected, "We needed more Hispanics and more members from the East side and the Northeast side ... We brought in some young dynamic women. The Y Board is so strong, and they have incredibly passionate women on that board. ... I attribute a lot of that to Myrna and her vision.”

In 1970, a delegation of African-American women at the national convention in Houston proposed a resolution that redefined the emphasis of the YWCA. Following heated discussion, the delegates adopted this imperative and it remains so today. Leticia Paez, former Y-Teen member and YWCA board president, attended the 1970 convention and remembers what the One Imperative discussion meant for her: “I think at that point it really shifted the YWCA’s mission. … The One Imperative really made the YWCA at the national level an agent for social change, instead of a women’s service organization.”

The El Paso YWCA has always been a leader in the nation, and in 1970, this association developed a Residential Intervention Center (RIC), providing private group homes for troubled teen girls, one of the first in the country. "Parade Magazine" published an article on the program in 1972, promoting it as a model for similar programs in other cities.

The YWCA provided child care for its participants when the Central Building opened in 1970, but it was soon evident that child care was a need throughout the city. In 1972, the YWCA contracted with the El Paso Housing Authority to administer bilingual and bicultural community services and child care in nine housing complexes. The YWCA also began to administer the Community Coordinated Child Care program, a child care resource, referral and advocacy program. The Y’s leadership in child care continued to be evident in 1981 on the East side, while a small facility in the Northeast was expanded and named the Myrna Deckert Branch in 1983. The Lower Valley Branch was dedicated in 1987, and the Katharine White Harvey Branch on the Westside opened in 1988 on land donated by the Paul and Katherine Harvey Trust in 1985. Capital campaigns to fund the facilities and to increase the emphasis of the YWCA were led by Myrna Deckert and a building committee. In 1988, the YWCA moved its administrative offices to 1918 Texas Ave, and dedicated it to Sarah D. Lea in honor of a former YWCA president.

1989 to the present – Empowering Women and Eliminating Racism

As El Paso changed from a manufacturing to a service-oriented economy, the YWCA continued to focus on programs for children and families. It purchased the Boy Scout Camp in the Upper Valley in 1991, renovating it as Camp YW and naming it in 1997 for Mary Ann Dodson. Partnerships with Insights Museum and the Ysleta ISD made it possible to offer science camps for children.

In 1994, the YWCA initiated Children Cope with Divorce, a court-mandated four-hour educational program designed to help divorcing parents focus on the needs of their children during this potentially traumatic period. The program partners with Rollercoasters, sponsored by the El Paso Child Guidance Center, which is designed to help children between the ages of 6-15 who are experiencing changes in family relationships or family conflicts and stress.

The Y’s leadership in child care continued as it successfully bid on the Workforce Development Board’s Child Care Management Service contract in 1990, serving as a referral and placement service covering all licensed day care facilities in El Paso. In 1999, the YWCA opened the Judy and Kirk Robison Mi Casa Child Development Center for homeless children in cooperation with the Homeless Coalition. Today the YWCA provides child care in 41 pre-school child development centers and 51 after-school programs throughout El Paso. Five of the child development centers were among the first to receive the Texas School Readiness™ certification, and the Texas Early Education Model (TEEM) selected the YWCA in 2009 to pilot a new academic curriculum for toddlers. In 2008, the Y began negotiations with the U.S. Army to implement after-school, youth and child care programs to serve children relocating to Fort Bliss through the BRAC process.

In 2008, the association piloted YW Zones, a youth fitness initiative featuring GEO Fit Curriculum, Wii Fit gaming systems and fitness lessons through interactive dance instruction. A grant has made it possible to expand the YW Zones to all five branches and incorporate fitness activities into after-school programs.

Homeless women and children, often fleeing violent domestic situations, are being helped by the Sara McKnight Transitional Living Center (TLC), opened in 1993. They may stay for up to 24 months while they participate in activities to help them transition to permanent housing. A 20-family expansion of the TLC opened in 2005 on Altura Avenue. A former resident commented, “The TLC fostered healthy thinking in my mind, which is what turned me around. They could have given me a place to stay for a moment, and that would have been fine. But because that extra piece was there to help change my thinking, it completely changed my life.”

With the Junior League of El Paso, the YWCA constructed Independence House, offering housing, case management and mentorship to survivors of domestic abuse. The YWCA is the largest provider of transitional housing for El Paso families and in 2007-2008, 82 percent of the families in such programs moved to permanent housing.

In 2007, the local YWCA’s separate Community Development Corporation completed 12 apartments adjacent to the Lower Valley Branch, offering housing for women with families that are independent and remain active in their community as yet another example of concern for community housing.

Several local YWCA leaders have served on Board of Directors of the YWCA of the USA and on the World Service Council. In 1999, the El Paso YWCA served as fiscal agent for the Change Initiative, a massive reorganization plan approved by the membership at a special convention in Dallas in 2000. Former El Paso YWCA Board President Leticia Paez served as the first president of the newly created YWCA National Coordinating Board.

El Paso’s YWCA created its Racial Justice Committee in 1997 to foster awareness on racism and discrimination to staff, participants and the El Paso community. The association collaborates with the El Paso Holocaust Museum and Study Center on the Racial Justice Institute which offers a curriculum of 150+ modules available for training seminars for businesses and community groups. The Racial Justice “We…the People” Initiative fosters justice, appreciation for diversity and the elimination of racism through core values of Respect, Understanding, Acceptance and Appreciation through education, collaboration, dialogue and advocacy.

Most El Pasoans think of recreation and child care when the YWCA is mentioned, and indeed, it provides them in abundance and serves more than 100,000 people a year. The YWCA is so much more, as a compilation of its history shows. In 1994, some 800 people attended the first Women’s Empowerment Awards (REACH) Luncheon, the YWCA’s major fundraising event, raising $100,000. On April 16, 2009, Lisa Ling spoke to a gathering of about 1,650 women and men at the YWCA’s annual event, raising $423,653. The YWCA is a careful steward in its financial resources, stretching its dollars to serve more than 100,000 people per year. Just as important as its 2,000 trained volunteers throughout the community who help implement their programs.

On May 3, 2009, the national YWCA General Assembly voted by 91 percent to revise its mission statement to the following: YWCA is dedicated to eliminating racism, empowering women and promoting peace, justice, freedom and dignity for all. Ever mindful of changing roles of women, the YWCA El Paso del Norte continually focuses on adapting these roles and locations, trying to reflect the needs of its community and to fulfill this mission. Reflecting on the history of the local YWCA, Sandra Braham, Chief Executive Officer, said, “The beautiful part of the Centennial is it gives you the opportunity to pull together the community, to remember what a difference this organization has made.”
Rosa Guerrero: Cultural Dynamo

By Raquel Andrade-Carrillo, Safaa Aboughalyoun, Jorge Flores, Lynette Martinez, and Melissa Saenz

Every culture is beautiful, every kind of language is beautiful, every kind of people, every color is beautiful.” So says teacher, humanitarian and internationally renowned dancer Rosa Ramirez Guerrero, who believes that cultural differences are the threads that make up the fabric of the United States. “I call my students a tapestry, a tapestry of many cultures,” she explained.

Guerrero was born in El Paso on Nov. 14, 1934, to doting parents, Pedro and Josefina Ramirez. Her childhood was filled with love and faith, and, because her parents had come from Mexico, a blending of cultures. In an interview with El Paso Community College student Raquel Andrade-Carrillo, Guerrero recalled her childhood as “beautiful,” and admitted that was her father’s favorite. Although her parents had little formal education, she and her four brothers and two sisters were taught early that education was important; they would conjugate Spanish verbs and learn world capitals just for the love of learning. Music and dance were also part of Guerrero’s life from the time she was born.

As a toddler, Guerrero would jump and bounce to music upon her father’s feet. Her parents loved to dance and would often take her to Juarez for dances and bullfights. At the age of five, and with her parents’ encouragement, Guerrero began to study dance and became a member of Aguilar’s Dance Academy. During World War II, the troupe performed for Fort Bliss soldiers at William Beaumont Hospital through the USO. In Password, a journal published by the El Paso County Historical Society, Guerrero reflected upon what a “peculiar sight” she must have made as the youngest dancer, dressed like Carmen Miranda and leading conga lines in an effort to entertain soldiers.

Although Guerrero’s life was filled with love, family, faith and culture, her family was like many others: money was in short supply. When she was about ten, she began cleaning houses for 50 cents a day, money she used for dance lessons. By eleven, she began teaching others to dance.

For Guerrero, learning folk dances taught her more than music and rhythm; it taught culture. Guerrero told interviewer Sarah Massey in 1995 for the University of Texas at San Antonio Institute of Texan Cultures, “When I hear the Jewish horah, [circle dance performed to the music of “Hava Nagila”], I become Jewish; when I hear the black gospel songs, I become black... I become that part of the world.”

However, when she first started school, Guerrero spoke only Spanish. Although a few teachers, like Guerrero’s kindergarten teacher, Mrs. French, reached across the communication barrier, common practice throughout the Southwest was to punish children for speaking Spanish, often with a paddle. But other punishments included writing “I will not speak that dirty language [Spanish]” over and over. In her interview with Massey, Guerrero recalled that teachers “used to pull my braids! Or they used to pinch me, or they used to lock us in closets, or they used to make us eat chile [peppers].”

This prejudice made an impact. Guerrero failed the first grade because she didn’t know enough English. By the third or fourth grade, she had decided that she wanted to become a teacher. She vowed then that she would treat her students differently, saying to herself, “I will love them, I will teach them... I will inspire them.”

During World War II, Guerrero’s family moved from their home on Santa Fe Street to Rio Grande Street. She attended the old Morehead Elementary School on Arizona Avenue and Campbell Street. She translated letters to and from three of her brothers who fought overseas during the war, becoming the family’s “bilingual correspondence secretary.”

Guerrero was very popular during her years at El Paso High School. She participated in student council, the Physical Education Association and even the National Rifle Association. She was also the first Mexican-American drum majorette for her school.

As a junior, she began dating Sergio Guerrero, and they were married at the age of 19. “We were immature embryos,” Guerrero commented to Andrade-Carrillo about her marriage of more than 50 years to the former Coronado High School basketball coach and teacher.

Guerrero attended Texas Western College, now the University of Texas at El Paso. After giving birth to her first child as a senior, Guerrero became the first person easy to say: You are a beautiful child... the very center of the universe. And they feel it... And they believe it.”

Tapestry, which is still seen today in classrooms across America, gained national distinction when Guerrero was presented with the CINE Golden Eagle Award. The CINE Award gives to professional and amateur filmmakers for portraying American life and thought realistically to global audiences. Among other filmmakers presented with the CINE are Steven Spielberg and Ron Howard.

In 1975, Guerrero founded her International Folklorico dance group, and under her artistic direction and choreography, Guerrero’s troupe entertained the public, performing at local venues as well as nationally on ABC’s Good Morning America.

Guerrero’s dance group also performed for President Regan in 1981 at the Kennedy Arts Center. In 1989, Guerrero’s goals shifted, and she handed over direction of the group to three individuals, one being her daughter, Ana Moncada.

Guerrero began to travel extensively, promoting her message of accepting cultural diversity. From 1989 through 1994, she was a part-time lecturer for UTEP, and between speaking engagements, she wrote poetry, published her book, Rosa! Tapestry of a Woman (1994) and produced a sequel to her dance film, Tapestry II (1995).

But for this mother and grandmother, Guerrero’s proudest moment came in 1992 when the El Paso Independent School District named a Westside elementary school after her. This gave Guerrero the distinction of becoming the first living educator, as well as the first Hispanic woman in El Paso, and only the second in Texas, to have a school named in her honor.

In 1994, Guerrero was the 74th woman inducted into the Texas Women’s Hall of Fame. She is also an honoree of the El Paso Commission for Women’s Hall of Fame. In 1997, she had a granite marker awarded to her and placed on the Legends of Texas Bridge, joining luminaries such as Barbara Bush, Walter Cronkite and Tom Landry. That same year she received UTEP’s Distinguished Alumnus Award, and in 1999, she was honored by the National Education Association for her dedication in promoting human and civil rights.

The Mexican Consulate gave the Ohtli Award to Guerrero for promoting Mexican culture for decades. Among other prestigious honors presented to Guerrero are Life Membership in the Texas Parent Teacher Association; Outstanding Woman in the Arts (Women’s Political Caucus); Outstanding Woman Artist in El Paso (the Mexican American National Association); one of the Outstanding Hispanics in the Southwest (Adolph Coors, Co.); the Valley Forge Freedoms Foundation Award; and the LULAC Arts and Humanities Award. Recently, readers of Southwest Senior named her the Best Older El Pasiono Who’s Made the Most Difference.

Today, Guerrero is an artist-in-residence at UTEP’s Chicano Studies Department and is the spokesperson for Las Palmas Medical Center. She continues to speak publicly for the rights of the oppressed as well as to lecture on cultural values and parenting while volunteering with various community organizations.

She enjoys writing poetry and spending time with her husband, who constantly advises her to slow down. But for Guerrero, who said she wants to be remembered best for her love and devotion to God, slowing down isn’t an option: life is beautiful and far too short. When her grandson once said to her, “Grandma, you’re not a regular grandma; you’re crazy!” Guerrero laughed and said, “I’m crazy for living; I’m crazy for life; let me be crazy every day.”
Notable Women continued from page 3

Stanton did not fit the schoolteacher stereotype. Proud of her independence and the fact that she never married, she reportedly said, “The life of a spinster is ideal, a spontaneous laugh is the happiest thing in the world, and to say ‘damn’ in the right spot is most invigorating.”

Olga Bernstein Kohlberg (1864-1935) came to El Paso from Prussia in 1884 with her husband, a tobacco merchant. Mrs. Kohlberg, a well-educated woman, was instrumental in the establishment of several civic organizations and institutions such as the Woman’s Club, the first hospital, Mt. Sinai Jewish Congregation and the public library, among others. She may be best-known, however, for establishing the first free public kindergarten in El Paso in 1893, also the first of its kind in the state of Texas.

Eugenia Mananyi Schuster (1865-1946), born in Hungary, was educated in Vienna, where she learned to speak five languages fluently and studied piano under Franz Liszt, the famous musician and composer. She came to El Paso with her physician husband in 1894. In 1902, she helped him establish the original Providence Hospital, becoming its administrator, and did all types of work in the hospital—including performing and managing all office work, housekeeping, cooking and custodial duties—in addition to rearing four children.

Kate Moore (1870-??) was the first woman to ride a bicycle in El Paso. Even riding with her bicycle skirts covering her legs, she shocked many of the older residents of the city. Moore was also one of the only two graduates from the first class at El Paso High, the city’s first high school, in 1887 (the other graduate was a boy). Becoming a music teacher, she could still be seen riding her bicycle to work.

Herlinda Wong Chew (1890s?-1939) was the child of a Chinese father and Aztec mother. By 1910, she and her Chinese husband, Antonio Chew, were living in Juárez, and owned a store there. Although the Chinese were not allowed to immigrate to the United States at that time, Mrs. Chew taught herself immigration law and found a way that her family and other Chinese people could legally immigrate to El Paso. She and her husband established the New China Grocery Store. Because of her work in immigration, she was known as the Honorary Chinese Consul, helping other Chinese and Mexicans immigrate to the United States.

Zacchia Jabalie Ayoub (1899-1980s) was one of the few young women allowed to work outside the home in her native Lebanon, helping in her father’s business. She came to El Paso as a 13-year-old bride in 1912, working with her husband at their small store in South El Paso. During the Depression when her husband lost his business, she and her sons peddled penny candy and chewing gum from a truck. Eventually she helped build the Border Tobacco Company, a multi-million dollar business, where she continued to work until she died in her eighties.

Callie Fairley (1881-1965) was a brave woman who worked with the El Paso Police Department during the 1930s and 1940s, when few women were detectives and probation officers. Although she was less than five feet tall, she often worked vice and brought fear into the hearts of the prostitutes and other women offenders that she rounded up in midnight raids. Mrs. Fairley was named Mother of the Year in 1963 and was described by newspaper reporters as a “tiny white-haired great-grandmother who sits in her rocking chair and crochets beautifully just like sweet old ladies are supposed to do.” Little did they know she was a pistol-packing mama in the early days.

Olalee Fowler McCall (1890-1957) came to El Paso about 1914 to teach English at Douglass School, the city’s only all-black school, and became the school’s principal in 1937. She helped establish the Roosevelt Day Nursery in 1940 which was later renamed the McCall Day Nursery as a tribute to her and her husband, who had raised a sizeable portion of the money used to construct a new building. The McCalls’ former home is now the site of the McCall Research Center, a museum and educational center for the study of African American history in El Paso.

Mabel C. Welch (1890-1981) designed and built many of the beautiful Mediterranean-style homes on Rim Road. After her building contractor husband’s death in 1927, Mrs. Welch continued his business, designing the houses, drawing the plans, keeping the books and supervising the actual construction. In 1939, she became the city’s first woman registered architect.

Charlee Kelly was one of four daughters born to an early El Paso mayor. She chose the military as her career. One of the first women to enlist in the Women’s Auxiliary Army Corps in 1942, she was with the first group of WAAC officers sent to the South Pacific during World War II. She was promoted from first lieutenant to major in less than two years. She served all around the world, completing two stints at the Pentagon and eventually attaining the rank of Lt. Colonel in 1956.

Thelma J. White, the valedictorian at Douglass School in 1954, filed a lawsuit in 1955 for admission to the then-segregated Texas Western College. The petition she filed in federal court to gain admission to TWC stated that she was denied access to an education “because of her race and color, contrary to and in violation of the Constitution and laws of the United States.” The landmark ruling proclaimed the segregation policy unconstitutional. This decision compelled all state colleges in Texas to change their admission rules. Thus her efforts eventually led to the desegregation of public colleges and universities throughout Texas.

Polly Harris made serving the needs of El Paso’s women, minorities and the elderly her life’s work. Besides shining in the business community, she served three terms as a City Council representative in the 1970s and 1980s and was well-known for her acting.

Alicia Rosencares Chacón, born and raised in El Paso, was a graduate of Ysleta High School. She was the first woman to be elected County Clerk in El Paso (1974), the first Mexican-American woman to serve on the city council (1983), and the first female County Judge (1990).

Rosa Guerrero not only taught dance in the public schools, but also directed the Rosa Guerrero Folklorico Internacional for almost 30 years. In 1974, her film Tapestry showcased not only her talent and work, but showed how she has struggled to foster goodwill and brotherhood among ethnic groups by showing us how to “love and appreciate the many cultures that make America.”

Peggy Rosson first gained knowledge of state government while serving on the Texas Public Utility Commission as the state’s first female commissioner. She built on that experience and became the first El Paso female Texas State Senator from El Paso in the 1990s.

El Paso businesswoman and pilot Suzie Azar had served two terms as city representative in the 1980s before being elected the first woman mayor in 1989. During her time in office, she supervised the first water conservation proposals as well as various building projects and infrastructure improvements.

Many other remarkable El Paso women can be added to the list. Maybe YOU will be the next woman to make a positive contribution to the city’s development. Why not?
For most longtime El Pasoans, Suzie Azar needs no introduction. She was El Paso’s first, and so far, only, woman mayor. While that distinction alone elevates Azar’s importance to the Southwest, her other accomplishments have her soaring in the skies.

Suzanne Schmeck was born in 1946 to a family of German-Irish descent in Bay City, Michigan. Being the middle child taught her the art of diplomacy at an early age. In a personal interview with El Paso Community College student Vicente Garcia, she said, “Middle children have to negotiate. You have to learn how to get along. For me, that’s part of leadership training. … You learn to be a team player when you’re in a middle child position.”

It was during these early years that Azar fell passionately for her first love: flying. As a youngster, she was a member of the Civil Air Patrol, flying around the perimeter of accident sites to look for victims. Wearing blue uniforms that resembled those of the Air Force and flying high above the ground and through the clouds convinced Azar that she wanted to become a licensed pilot. But money was scarce, and that dream would be put off for many years.

In 1970, Azar moved to El Paso with her first husband and family. She attended the University of Texas at El Paso, where she earned a bachelor’s degree in business management. During this time, Azar was awarded UTEP’s oldest honor for service to both the community and the university as a Woman of Mines, as well as membership in the Golden Key National Honors Society.

In 1972, Azar began working as a legal assistant for one of El Paso’s premier attorneys, Robert “Ray” Pearson, and then went on to become the community affairs director for Dickshire Coors, owned by Richard “Dick” Azar. Although staying on the sidelines of local politics for many years, it was during this time that Azar became involved in El Paso’s Women’s Political Caucus and the League of Women Voters.

From 1978 through 1985, Azar was a member of the Democratic Executive Committee, serving four terms as precinct chair. Azar also participated in the Leadership El Paso program, and served on both the City Charter Commission and Emergency Medical Service Board.

In 1982 she and Dick Azar were married. For more than 25 years, this high-profile couple was known for their love of aviation and El Paso in general. Dick Azar died in May 2009.

Being a wife and the mother of two girls, Michelle and Christie, did not slow her down. In December 1984, Azar announced her plans to run for Polly Harris’ West-Central City Council seat. The area the vacated spot represented encompassed most of Central El Paso, as well as Chihuahuita and other parts of the border. At that time there were 23,292 registered voters in that area, 66 percent with Hispanic surnames.

On December 6, the El Paso Times reported that Azar’s campaign could be based on prudent government, because, Azar said, “They [people] don’t want to buy more government.” She spent three months campaigning door to door and on election day, Azar flew over El Paso pulling a campaign banner behind her plane.

Azar took the victory over four Hispanics without a runoff. Azar’s campaign manager, Susan Hatch, was quoted in an El Paso Times article written by Gary Scharrer on Dec. 9, 1986, that Azar’s victory occurred because “she’s honest, hard-working, and cares about the people.”

Campaigning wasn’t always smooth flying, though. Deliberate mudslinging and factual inaccuracies, like those perpetrated by challenger Richard Telles Sr., were typical of her campaigns for city representative. El Paso Times writer David Crowder reported on April 3, 1987, that Telles sent flyers out to most households in the West-Central District proclaiming Azar to be an Arab-American, Republican and out to better her own interests. Personal information, such as age and birthplace, were also wrong. According to Azar, the only correct information was that she was indeed a mother of two children.

The comparative lack of women in politics also posed a setback. Reporter Gary Scharrer reported that of the 93 major political offices in El Paso in January 1988, women held only 17. Although women in El Paso constituted over 50 percent of the 184,717 registered voters, the traditional view of men making better leaders still dominated politics.

In 1989, Mayor Jonathan Rogers’ last term in office was coming to an end after four consecutive two-year stints. Six candidates vied for the position, including two city council members, Democrat Suzie Azar and Republican Ed Elsey. After the general election on May 6, 1989, Azar and Elsey battled in a runoff. On May 29, The New York Times declared Azar’s history-setting victory in politics to be a “landslide” with 65 percent of the vote. “I’m thrilled to death,” Azar said. “I’m ready to go to work.”

In June 1989, El Paso’s first woman mayor was sworn in. Azar propped open the mayor’s office doors with her love of flying with her two daughters, and they were the first to participate in races ever held. In the 26th annual Palms to Pines Air Race, Azar and her daughter Michelle finished first of nine first-time racers, and thirteenth overall.

In a June 17, 2001, article published in the El Paso Times, Azar described a checkpoint fly-in. At full open throttle and only 300 feet above the runway, planes make high-speed passes for the timers. “It is just so darn exciting,” Azar exclaimed.

The El Paso Commission for Women Hall of Fame inducted Azar under the public service category in March 2005. She was recognized for her focus on environmental issues and El Paso’s first water conservation initiative. Her administration funded the El Paso Zoo expansion, directed the building campaign for the El Paso Museum of Art, built the Painted Dunes Golf Course and Cohen Stadium and was responsible for many highway projects and safety initiatives, including the hiring of 100 additional police officers. Azar also has been honored by many organizations, including the YWCA, the NAACP, HUD, the League of Women Voters and the El Paso Aviation Association.

For El Paso, Suzanne Azar is one of the highest flyers in our beautiful Southwest skies.