Belen Robles: Voice for the Latino Community

By Jessica M. Oracio and Katherine Smith

Her senior class at Bowie High School in El Paso, Texas, selected her "Most Likely to Succeed." It was a title that Belen Robles took to heart in the 1950s and is still making come true.

Robles was the fifth child of a family of 10 children born to immigrants who had come to the United States from Mexico in the early 20th century, her father from the state of Chihuahua, her mother from Zacatecas. Attending parochial school at St. Mary's, she began high school at St. Joseph's but graduated from Bowie High School.

Like most young women in the 1950s, Belen was expected to find a good man, get married and raise a family. Three months after high school graduation, she married Ramiro Robles, and the couple began raising a family. She soon discovered that her family needed two incomes. In an interview with National Public Radio's Michel Martin in 2008, Robles said it took about six months to convince her husband that his manhood would not suffer if she began working outside the home.

In an interview with Jose Estrada in 1976, Robles described applying in 1955 for a job at a well-known company in El Paso. She was told by a receptionist in the lobby of the building that the company did not hire Mexicans except as elevator girls or cooks. Although Robles kept her appointment to speak with the personnel manager, she knew she would not be hired. Despite being born and raised in the United States, she was seen as "Mexican."

She did land a job as a secretary-receptionist with a real estate company, but the earlier experience opened the eyes of this young woman to the reality of the inequality that existed in her home town. Not only did she realize that women were second class citizens, but so were Latinos. If you were both, then you had two strikes against you. Robles told EPCC student Jessica Oracio that she realized the challenges Mexican Americans faced in health care and education as well as employment, and it gave her the *ganas* ("the will" or "determination") to motivate her in her job search.

At 20, Robles took a job as a clerk with the U. S. Department of Justice, Immigration and Naturalization Service. Because she was fluent in English and Spanish, she often was called in to interpret for exclusion and deportation hearings. In this role she worked with a division that investigated persons who could be excluded from remaining in the United States on grounds of moral, criminal or subversive backgrounds.

Shortly after her first disappointing interview as an adult, Robles joined the League of United Latin American Citizens or LULAC, the oldest and largest Latino civil rights organization in the United States. Organized in 1929 in Corpus Christi, Texas, LULAC was led for years only by men. LULAC allowed women's auxiliaries, but in 1933 women began to form their own councils. Ladies LULAC Council No. 9 was founded in El Paso in February 1934. (See articles on the history of LULAC and the role of women in LULAC in Volume 25 of *Borderlands*.)

At first, LULAC members banded together to protect their families and businesses as well as to help members find employment and keep children in school. Then LULAC began the fight to desegregate schools and other public facilities in Texas. After World War II, victories in California and Texas in desegregating schools would set the scene for Brown vs. Board of Education in 1954, which desegregated public schools.

LULAC fought for the right of Mexican Americans to serve on juries and began voter registration drives, raising money to help pay poll taxes, which Texas maintained until 1966. Women's councils often worked independently of the state and national organizations and concentrated on working with women and children, the elderly, the poor and for education, realizing that it was the key to success in America.

Joining Ladies Council No. 9 in 1957, Robles quickly became active in the local projects of LULAC, eventually serving in nearly every office: president, vice president, secretary, treasurer and trustee. She and the council focused on the needs of children, teaching pre-schoolers at age five the basic 400 words in the English language so that they could handle the first grade adequately. Known as the "Little School of 400," the statewide program was the basis of what would become the national program called Project Head Start in the Lyndon B. Johnson administration.

The first woman national president of LULAC, Belen Robles is a leader in the El Paso community. *(Photo courtesy of Belen Robles)*

She also worked within her council and with Council No. 132 to develop a lunch program in El Paso grade schools before the federal lunch program began. She and the councils provided children with eye glasses, clothing and shoes, programs which have been absorbed by federal agencies. Robles also became a big part of a program providing weekly English and citizenship classes to immigrants studying to become citizens that showed her the dedication these adults had to become naturalized Americans.

After 15 years with the federal Immigration and Naturalization Service, Robles went to work with the U. S. Customs Service as a customs inspector, one of five women who were available to inspect females. She became a senior officer and the first woman chief inspector in El Paso. As an administrative supervisor, Robles found herself in another male-dominated position. "They [male inspectors] had a hard time accepting being led by a female," she told Oracio.

While working and raising three children, Robles remained involved with LULAC at the local and national level, being appointed national secretary in 1964 and serving in this capacity for six years under five presidents. She was the first woman to be appointed to the board of directors of SER-Jobs for Progress, the job-training program that LULAC initiated. By the 1970s, most LULAC councils were integrated and women members were also able to run for national office.

Robles told Martin that she had several mentors in LULAC, and it was Jorge Alfred Hernandez, a civil rights leader from East Texas and president of LULAC in 1969, who encouraged her to run for national president. Belen Robles became the first woman to do so in 1970 at the national convention in Laredo, Texas, in a "very macho environment," as she explained to Oracio. She ran against four men, "so I didn't have fun," she told Martin. The organization was not ready for a woman president, but Robles kept running for office. In 1974, she was elected the first woman to serve as National Vice President for the Southwest.

Robles ran for the presidency again at the convention in Los Angeles and again lost to a man. The third time was the charm. In 1994 at the national convention in El Paso, Robles ran against another woman, Rosa Rosales. In a close race, Robles was the first woman to be elected national president. She was so popular that she was elected to three more terms, serving a total of four years as national president. She credits women in both the public and private sector for joining to help make Latinos more visible and successful in the United States. These women showed her how to "travel through the maze of D. C." LULAC raised money and established an office in Washington in 1996. "This was achieved through the network of women. It was a challenge," Robles told Oracio.

One thing, Robles said, that does bother her is that "highly successful Latinas in influential positions don't do enough to help other Latinas. They feel they did it [succeeded] on their own, but hardly anyone does this alone. We need to have more successful Latinas help others." When Oracio asked what priorities Latinas of this generation should have, Robles responded by saying, "You must be well-rounded and take advantage of all educational opportunities and develop *people* skills. The only barriers and obstacles you have you put there yourself. You must have passion, dedication, perseverance. You must set goals – short-term, long-term – and be flexible."

Although Robles says she has been passionate about all areas that concern Latinos, education appears to be her primary issue. From the beginning, LULAC has provided scholarships and other financial aid for deserving students, money at the local council level coming from enchilada dinners in the early years. In 1973 during Robles' tenure as chairperson of the board of LULAC, the organization implemented a national scholarship program focused on Latinos. Over the years, millions of dollars have been matched at the national level from corporations for students through LULAC'S National Educational Service Centers (LNESC).

Education and employment go hand in hand, said Robles. "If parents don't have good jobs, it will impact education. If health care for the child or parents is not good, it will affect education. Everything is interwoven," she told Oracio. Robles has never been content to let others make the decisions on these issues. "You must be at the table where these decisions are made," she continued. "Be part of the boards of financial institutions that finance these businesses." Robles said she believes that women in leadership positions bring more to the table than leadership skills. "We pay attention to details," she told Oracio.

Although retired from her federal job, Robles is anything but retired. Still active in LULAC at the national and local levels, she is the marketing director for the El Paso Fiesta de las Flores held at the El Paso County Coliseum during Labor Day weekend, a money maker for LULAC scholarships. And true to her belief that one must be at the table where decisions are

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tanning. Colonists cultivated grapes, apples, pears, apricots and peaches, as well as artichokes and asparagus, some of which was taken by thieving neighbors.

But the climate was no friend to the farmers. Heat warped irrigation pipes. Floods washed away new crops. Fires destroyed farm equipment. Soon, the huge farming enterprise was overrun with debt.

The colonists also had an extensive herd of dairy cattle to provide milk for the children. High-quality cattle that filled barns and corrals gradually decreased in number as neighboring families also made off with the colony's animals.

While the external complications were plenty, it was the internal strife that brought about the colony's demise.

During Shalam's conception in 1884, Newbrough was still married to his first wife, Rachel. He was granted a divorce on Oct. 6, 1886. Newbrough and Frances Sweet were married in 1887, causing dissension amongst the colonists, as well as rumors of free-love and easy character.

The well publicized trial of Ellis vs. Howland and Newbrough over ownership of the land and delay of agricultural plans also played a major role in the demise of the colony. Cutting remakes made by the presiding judge, Justice A. A. Freeman, caused derogatory publicity, and recruitment of potential colonists came to a halt.

Ultimate disaster befell the colony in 1891 when Newbrough died of influenza. Frances Newbrough and Andrew Howland attempted to revive the faded dream. In 1893 they were married to quiet sordid rumors. For almost a decade, they struggled to keep the colony going.

By 1900, Shalam was destitute. The school closed, children rebelled and colonists squabbled. They officially disbanded in 1901, with the remaining children sent to orphanages in Texas and Colorado.

Andrew Howland sold Shalam in1907 for $60,000. He and Frances settled in El Paso, selling vegetarian snacks.

The Newbroughs' daughter, Justine, changed her name to Jone Howland, and wrote for an El Paso newspaper.

Never reaching the hundreds predicted, the 50 children of Shalam grew up, most abandoning their Faithist training. Some found relatives, others wandered.

The Faithists of Shalam scattered throughout the West. Some started their own colonies, all to be short-lived. In 1942, Faithists led by Wing Anderson bought property in Utah and Colorado for orphanages and agriculture. Today, there are about 1,500 Faithists in the United States, and the *Oahspe* is still in print and available online, but very little of Shalam can be seen. Amidst cottonwood trees stands the studio, the sole surviving building, where Newbrough painted religious art while children colored at his feet.

The history of this short-lived utopian society, laced with fact and fiction, is attracting new attention. The Shalam Colony & Oahspe Museum in Las Cruces is located at 1910 Calle de Niños. T. Robin Riley, a former NMSU professor now teaching in Minnesota, has recently produced a documentary film on the colony and curated an exhibit in 2009 at the Farm and Ranch Museum in Las Cruces. Can Hollywood be far behind?

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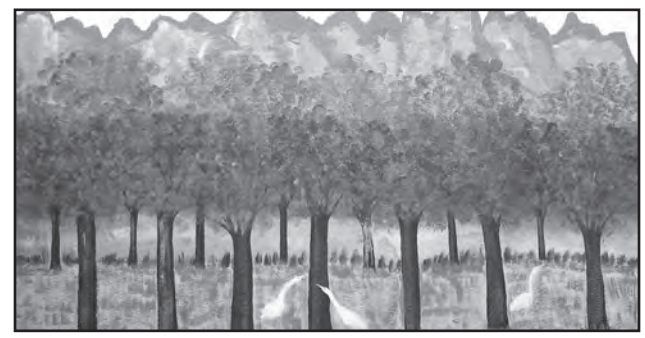
building, the slaughtering and freezing plants for the geese, a blacksmith shop, a machine shop, a store and a clinic with a nurse, producing the atmosphere of a little town.

Employees lived in company housing and in early days bought their food and other necessities in a commissary which became the Stahmann Country Store, the retail outlet for pecans and related products. Later a modern three-story processing plant replaced the other two plants, and mechanical shakers greatly reduced the number of employees. By 1989, the Stahmanns halted processing activities, but they worked with the New Mexico Department of Labor to retrain and find their former employees other jobs.

Deane also built an airstrip high atop a mesa on his property and acquired several aircraft, including B-26 bombers used in World War II and small jets, that he used for various activities, such as crow patrol (the birds love pecans), spraying of herbicides and fertilizer and freight and charter passenger service. At one time, he even provided commuter airline service in southern New Mexico.

In the 1960s, Deane's son, Deane Jr., worked for Barry Goldwater and announced he would leave the country if Lyndon Johnson became president. Johnson did—and so did Deane Jr. He convinced his father to buy 1,800 acres in New South Wales, Australia, to establish a branch of Stahmann Farms, and in 1965



This mural on the side of the Country Store depicts Stahmann Farms' young trees. ***(Photo by Heather Coons)***

planted the first pecan trees at his farm named Las Piedras ("the rocks" or "the stones" in Spanish) at Gatton in Queensland. Soon after, he did the same at the much larger farm named Trawalla (Aboriginal for "flood waters") near Moree in New South Wales. In 1979, Deane Jr. sold 250,000 pounds of the nuts in the shell to China, opening an important market.

Deane Sr. died in 1970, and many changes occurred at the Mesilla Valley farm over the next few years. Cotton ceased to be planted, and the tree nursery was phased out. The chickens were sold and the facilities leased to a Mississippi firm with the agreement that the Stahmanns would still get the manure from the chickens. While Bill Stahmann was in charge of the American operations, Deane Jr. managed the Australian farms.

The Australian branch of Stahmann Farms funded research to find alternate ways to rid the trees of two main pests, the green vegetable bug and the Maroga or stem girdler, and introduced a native wasp and a South American parasite which all but eliminated these threats to the trees. Biological solutions are still an important part of Stahmann's operations both in Australia and New Mexico, the latter farm using ladybugs and lacewing flies, among other natural controls. The Australian farm employs a full time entomologist. In 2010, the first fully certified organic pecans are being produced at the farm near Gatton in Australia.

Stahmann trees provide a beautiful canopy of shade for travelers and tourists who take the slow rural road to Las Cruces from El Paso. Today, Stahmann's in the Mesilla Valley is still operated by the family and the 128,000 trees produce some 8,000,000 pounds of Western Schley and Bradley varieties of pecans per year. A large variety of candies, snacks and gift items are available at the Stahmann Country Store and also may be ordered online. One hundred years after the Stahmann family came to the Southwest for health reasons, the name still stands for quality pecans and innovative farming methods.

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made, Robles is the Trustee for District 3 of El Paso Community College.

When Jessica Oracio asked Robles, "What do you foresee for the Latina community?" she responded quickly, "There is no limit nowadays. It's wide open when you have Justice Sotomayor in the Supreme Court, when you see Latina women in aerospace, the military, boards of major corporations. I am a strong proponent of educating the women because you educate the family."

The senior class of Bowie High School knew what they were doing when they selected Belen Robles "Most Likely to Succeed" all those many years ago!

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June Davidson, an actor with the Upstairs Theater, stated in an *El Paso Times* article written by Pat Henry entitled "Spooked Actors Insist 'Stage Fright' is No Act," that stage lights would mysteriously change colors or explode and props would fall for no reason.

Bill Logan, another thespian with the Upstairs Theater, stated in that same article that he and two others saw the image of Pancho Villa across the street and heard the jangling of his spurs on the first floor.

I had to know if the building was really haunted. Playing a hunch, I went downtown and ended up having a conversation with the law office's receptionist, Natalie Castillo, mentioned at the beginning of this story.

Not only did Castillo admit to seeing things out of the corner of her eye and feeling as if someone else were in the room, she also recalled hearing from housekeeping staff that doors rattled for no reason. Castillo was adamant that the activity was in no way negative. "It's not bad. I just know something's there."

Just a little over 100 years ago, El Paso's social elite gathered together to form an alliance in an effort to build a better city for future generations. Because of their commitment, the borderland prospered. The Toltec Building was the home for these progressive-minded individuals, and its members left us with more than the buildings and improvements they made for our area, like Elephant Butte Dam, the electric and water companies, banks, schools and the university. They left us with a legacy: working together for the prosperity of the community.

Too many important people walked the halls of the Toltec Building, and too many important events took place inside its sacred walls for it not to have left an indelible mark. Whether it's haunted or not, the building's unique shape and history make it one of El Paso's major landmarks.