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, he 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 Coliseum. 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 Yarbrough’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.

Chacón knew the chances for success were slim. While Chacón didn’t want to announce her as the winner of the election. But by her second term in 1973, a second Mexican-American had announced that 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 of retirement, Chacón was named director of the United Way in 1996, where she helped 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 the money she had raised to help fund Chacón’s 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.

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 candidate’s qualifications. More women and many more Mexican-Americans can be found in El Paso and national politics, from school boards to executive levels. Rick Bela, former HACER president, called Alicia Chacón, “the mother of modern Chicano politics.” A fitting title. 