ABARCA, APOLONIA “POLLY” MUÑOZ (1920–)

In June 1941 twenty-year-old Apolonia “Polly” Muñoz left her home in Mission, Texas, for Corpus Christi to pursue an education in nursing. Since the age of fifteen she had known that she wanted a career as a public servant. Abarca found her calling when she helped a nurse take handicapped children to a hospital in Galveston for treatment. Volunteering her time to help those in need became a way of life for her. While she was still a student, Abarca spent time volunteering at the Department of Immigration and working at the local dry-goods store on Saturdays—a task her father disapproved of. To Antonio Muñoz, the father of ten children, education was the primary goal.

When Apolonia Muñoz Abarca arrived at Fred Roberts Nursing School in Corpus Christi, she realized that she was the only Hispanic in the class. Although she had grown up in segregated schools in Mission, now she faced a whole new dilemma. Her roommate was frightened of her. In her hometown in Virginia, the young lady had been told that “Mexicans would kill you,” Abarca recalled. Fortunately the fear was quickly dispersed, and the two became close friends. “We [Hispanics] always had to work a little bit harder to prove ourselves,” she said.

During her first year at nursing school Abarca’s older brother Antonio Muñoz was sent to Europe as a gunner in the air force. The next year her fiancé joined the army and was sent to Germany. Money was becoming scarce in the Muñoz family, and Abarca began to think that joining the Cadet Corps as a nurse was her only option. She wrote to her brother and her fiancé, whom she later married after the war, telling them of her plans, but both of them begged her to stay at home. Her brother sent money to pay for the remainder of nursing school, and she graduated in 1944 as a registered nurse. Abarca worked at Memorial Hospital in Corpus Christi, where she set up new operating and emergency rooms and soon became the supervisor of the outpatient clinic. In 1946 she joined the U.S. Public Health Service hospital in Corpus Christi and also began volunteering as a Red Cross nurse in the settlement house. There she taught home nursing in Spanish and English, again as a volunteer. For fifteen years she worked as a nurse at the City-County Health Department.

Apolonia Abarca (back, second from left) was a member of the 1944 nursing class at Fred Roberts Hospital, Corpus Christi. Courtesy of the U.S. Latino and Latina World War II Oral History Project, University of Texas, Austin.
In 1964 Abarca helped win the first federal grant in the United States for family planning—a milestone for health care. She said that she supported providing birth control after working as a public health nurse for so many years. Poor young women were constantly asking her how not to get pregnant too soon. Families lived in poverty. Children were neglected and undernourished. “At that time the word birth control was a no-no,” commented Abarca. “I was daring, I guess.” In 1965 Abarca was hired as the executive director of the area Planned Parenthood center and remained there until the services were turned over to the local health department. Abarca later worked as the director of nursing at the state-operated Corpus Christi school for mentally retarded children. She retired in 1974. Her husband, Antonio Abarca, died in 1984. Now in her eighties, Abarca still lives in Corpus Christi.

See also World War II


Darcie Stevens

ACOSTA, LUCY (1926– )

Born in 1926 in Miami, Arizona, Lucy Acosta was six years old when her family moved to El Paso, Texas. In the midst of the Great Depression Miami’s copper mines, which had employed many of her family members, shut down, and many families, including Acosta’s, were forced to seek employment elsewhere. Acosta’s father was killed in one of these old copper mines when she was only three years old. Although her mother remarried a few years after they arrived in El Paso, Acosta remembers that it was pension payments her family received following her father’s death that enabled them to survive the depression years. These payments meant that she could attend school full-time, unlike many of her friends and neighbors who had to work instead. Also, unlike many of her male peers, Acosta was free of the requirements of military service that withdrew most Mexican American boys in her high school. With a great love for her studies, Acosta excelled in school, graduating from Bowie High School in the top ten of her class. After high school she attended International Business College in El Paso, from which she graduated in 1945, and went on to hold several clerical and accounting jobs into the 1970s. Acosta married Alejandro Acosta in 1948 and gave birth to two children, Alex and Danny.

Acosta joined the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) in 1957 and helped organize LULAC’s Ladies Council No. 335, which was officially chartered in 1958. Although a Ladies Council in El Paso already existed (formed in 1934), Acosta and a few others felt that its dwindling membership signaled the need for a new council that might better represent the interests of a younger Mexican American generation. Beginning with “thirty some-odd” women, Ladies Council No. 335 grew to average between 50 and 100 members. Coinciding with the council’s birth was the campaign of El Paso’s first Mexican American mayor, Raymond Telles. Thus one of the council’s first political actions involved raising funds to pay the poll taxes to Mexican Americans to ensure their right to vote in the mayoral election. Although LULAC’s official policy prohibited the organization from endorsing specific candidates, it nonetheless offered essential support to the Telles campaign through its registration drives. Acosta recalls spending Saturdays fundraising in front of the local Sears, J.C. Penney’s, numerous other stores, local churches, and the county courthouse. She remembers that a large part of their work required going door-to-door to register voters from south El Paso. Speaking of her involvement in LULAC’s 1957 registration drive, Acosta recalls:

I was still not very much in the political scene. I was there because Raymond Telles inspired all these people… Let me tell you that people that had never, ever, ever voted—Mexican people I’m talking about—or ever, ever, taken… well, they couldn’t vote because they never had a poll tax, would go out and buy a poll tax. Raymond Telles was a mexicano, and wouldn’t it be wonderful if we would have the first Mexican-American mayor, the city of El Paso.

The registration drives were an enormous success. LULAC’s efforts and Telles’s election drew on the growing resolve of Mexican Americans across the nation. In particular, veterans returning home from World War II sought to challenge the discrimination they faced in the draft and the continuing discrimination they faced when they applied for jobs upon their return home.

Raymond Telles’s election was a turning point for Acosta as well. Involvement in the campaign marked her entry into political activism and touched off what was to become a long and illustrious career with LULAC. She held numerous positions with her local chapter, as well as in the national administration of LULAC. In addition, she was appointed to various committees in Telles’s administration. After his term she continued to hold appointments under Mayor Judson Williams and subsequent mayors. In 1972 she became the first woman in the history of El Paso to be appointed civil service commissioner.

The LULAC Ladies Council No. 335 continued to play an important role in registration drives. In 1960 it worked to organize Mexican American voters who
backed John F. Kennedy for president. Raymond Telles left El Paso during his second term as mayor to work in the Kennedy administration. In 1970 he launched an unsuccessful bid for Congress. Acosta remained a close friend and supporter of Telles during the election in which Mexican Americans and Democrats were deeply divided. Of the election, she remembers that “a lot of people were just very hurt that he left, he took off and left us, you know. Like if we were his little chickens and he took off and he left us.”

In addition to her continued involvement with LULAC, Acosta’s public service included membership in the PTA, St. Joseph’s Catholic Parish, and United Way and seats on the board of directors for multiple city and county agencies. Throughout her career she received numerous honors for her commitment to political activism and to the city of El Paso in particular. In 1963 and again in 1973 she was selected Outstanding LULAC National Woman of the Year and Outstanding LULAC Woman for the State of Texas and for the City of El Paso District No. 4.

See also League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC)


ACOSTA, VICE, CELÍA M. (1919–1993)

Hailed as a mixture of Mother Teresa, Felisa Rincón de Gautier (the first female mayor of San Juan), and Eleanor Roosevelt, Celia Acosta was a pioneer of the Puerto Rican community in New York City. She was born on June 20, 1919, in Guayanilla, a small municipality on Puerto Rico’s southern coast. A committed follower of the advisory board of the Brooklyn branch of the Urban League. She became the first Puerto Rican female real-estate broker in Brooklyn and the first female grand marshal of the now National Puerto Rican Day Parade. Acosta was an established businesswoman who used her contacts and influences to advance the cause of social and economic equality, as well as the artistic heritage of the Puerto Rican people, both in New York City and on the island.

Her earliest years were spent in Puerto Rico. Acosta’s father, Ramón, was a man of varied talents, having mastered the shoemakers’ art while tending to a number of real-estate holdings and selling hardware and trinkets. Her mother, Flora, and her father decided to migrate to New York City in 1926, following the patterns of other migrants who came to U.S. shores not solely for economic reasons, but to seek educational advancement and to reunite with family members who had preceded them. The family settled in the Navy Yard area of Brooklyn among many Italian immigrants who themselves were recent arrivals and struggling to learn the English language. A precocious, slightly built, thin child, Acosta excelled in her acquisition of English and often served as a tutor to new arrivals from Puerto Rico. She has recounted how, given her appearance and the widespread fear of tuberculosis, school authorities would place her in special classes for children thought to be carrying this disease. When she was twelve, Acosta’s family returned to Puerto Rico, nostalgic for the warmth and energizing climate of the island. During that one year Acosta found herself struggling to catch up in Spanish with island-raised classmates. This factor, coupled with her mother’s desire to once more reunite the family, motivated their return to New York.

As a young Puerto Rican teenager, Acosta confronted many prejudices. However, she also met individuals who influenced the course her life would take. At thirteen she was encouraged by her mother’s employer, a Mr. Kaufman, not to leave school for factory work. Although she did not accept this form of employment initially, Acosta’s desire to provide for herself and her household led her to work in factories and offices throughout her young adult life. Acosta had wanted to graduate from Girls’ Commercial High School but was discouraged by a school administrator who suggested that a girl reared near the dockyards came from the “other side of the tracks.” Acosta persisted and eventually was enrolled.

This type of searing experience motivated her to ensure that others would not have to face the same discrimination. After completing her secondary education in night school, she set out to acquire the many skills she would need to advance her community. In the late 1930s she worked in a variety of jobs, including import-export, making artificial flowers, and the graveyard shift in a defense plant. A loan from her uncle allowed her to buy into a neighborhood business in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, that soon became an information and resource network for those most in need of social services.

Acosta’s many interests led her to study literature, sociology, and business at Brooklyn College and Pace University on a non-credit basis. From 1942 to 1948 she developed additional skills as an accountant and translator while also serving the community as an interpreter and an informal curator of Puerto Rican artis-
Acosta, Vice, Celia M.

Acosta, Vice, Celia M.
ic and cultural history. Her civic involvement covered
many fronts, including active leadership in the local
Democratic regular and independent political clubs. In
1954 she helped found the Fernando Sierra Vardeci Inde-
pendent Democratic Club in Brooklyn. She success-
fully set out to unite the many disparate Puerto
Rican/Hispanic organizations in Brooklyn by forming
a powerful federation known as the Council of Brook-
lyn Organizations that was able to influence New York
City's political hierarchy. In the absence of any govern-
ment funding, Acosta asserted that she was obliged to
pay “la renta y la luz del Concilio” (the rent and light
bills of the council). She also stated that from these of-
fices in Williamsburg, Boricua College, the first Puerto
Rican institution of higher education in the United
States, emerged. While she was immersed in the issues
and problems affecting the Puerto Rican community,
including voting rights and the struggle for bilingual
services for a predominantly Spanish-speaking mi-
grant community, she allied herself with the African
American struggle for civil rights and made it her own.
This commitment was realized through her work with
the Urban League, the National Association for the Ad-
vancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the
Lafayette Boys’ Club.

Her leadership in the community was recognized in
1960 when she was named the first female grand mar-
shal of New York City’s Puerto Rican Day Parade. She
described this position as significant because, in her
own words, “el desfile no era solamente para fiestar,
era además una fuerza política” (the parade was not
just festive but a political force as well). Subsequently
she was named to the Commission on Human Rights
and served actively on the Williamsburg-Greenpoint
local school board. In this capacity she was able to uti-
lize her mediation and conflict-resolution skills to
bring together white ethnics and communities of color.
Amid all the political involvement Acosta Vice found
time, in 1961 to organize the first Three Kings Day Pa-
rade in Brooklyn, distributing free toys during the
Christmas season to families who could not afford
them. She was approached to run as coleader of the
Brooklyn Democratic Party representing the Puerto
Rican community, a position she did not relish, given
its largely ceremonial status. In addition, in 1964
Acosta Vice was asked to head a major government-
sponsored social service agency, the Eleanor Roosevelt
Job Orientation in Neighborhoods Center (JOIN), to
help troubled youth. Her proven leadership and ability
to mobilize the community led her to become the di-
rector of information and community relations for the
Community Corporation of Williamsburg in 1968.

A lifelong supporter of the Puerto Rican arts, she
maintained an extensive book collection, considered
the foundation for New York’s Museo del Barrio. In the
1970s she founded the first library and bookstore on
Puerto Rico in New York City, the Puerto Rican Heritage
Bookstore, and made frequent trips to the island to
purchase art and handicrafts. By 1979 Acosta returned
to her homeland. Continuing her unstinting support of
Puerto Rican arts and culture, she established the
Kiosko Cultural in Plaza de Las Americas, Puerto Rico’s
most prominent commercial center.

Celia Acosta Vice died following a bout with cancer
on January 30, 1993. Her service was attended not only
by her three daughters, but also by the former director
of the renowned Institute of Puerto Rican Culture, Dr.
Ricardo Alegria. She leaves a long legacy of unflinch-
ing engagement as a female pioneer in the economic,
political, social, and cultural affairs of the Puerto Rican
community in New York City and in Puerto Rico. In the
tradition of the “servant leader,” Acosta Vice selflessly
sought to empower disenfranchised constituencies
and provided a vision for the pursuit of social equity
and justice.

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Celia M. Acosta Vice, Democratic candidate for the New York
State Assembly. Courtesy of the Justo A. Marti Photograph
Collection. Centro Archives, Centro de Estudios
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AGING

The research on aging gives limited attention to racial/ethnic groups. It was not until the 1960s that studies of older African Americans emerged, and attention to Latinas/Latinos in general began to appear during the 1970s. Most of the literature focused on Chicanas/Chicanos, the largest proportion of Latinas/Latinos in the United States. Nevertheless, within this population social scientists paid little attention to the elderly, partly because of misconceptions and stereotypes about their place within the family and the broader society. Social science literature tended to paint a rather romanticized picture of the extended Latino or Hispanic family, which was believed to support the aged and protect them from a “hostile” world. As a result, the problems of older individuals, unlike their counterparts in other racial/ethnic minority groups, were minimized by the “supportive qualities” of the Latino family. While such ideas continue to the present, this position has attracted critical attention in recent years.

Until the 1980s the available research on Latinos generally ignored critical gender analyses or differences. With respect to gender, differences among Latinos are similar to those of other elderly groups. For example, women generally live longer and outnumber men. Older Latino men marry or remarry more often than men in other racial/ethnic minority groups. Sanchez-Ayendez (1986), who studied “the interplay between values and behavior in family and community of a group of older, low income Puerto Rican women in Boston,” describes how women create and utilize familial and community networks in a supportive, productive nature. Bastida (1984) explored age- and gender-linked norms among Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Cuban women and found that core cultural elements of the collective identity system exist among all three populations. In other words, women’s lives are shaped by sex-appropriate behavior and the pursuit of realism regarding age and aging. A comprehensive work on older Latinas, edited by Marta Sotomayor (1995), helps understand current research and its implications for policy development. Particular attention and advice are available for program administrators, psychologists and counselors, doctors, nurses, and service providers.

Espin’s (1992) work on contemporary sexuality and the Hispanic woman suggests that “the honor of Latin families is strongly tied to the sexual purity of women. And the concept of honor and dignity is one of the essential distinctive marks of Hispanic culture.” Hispanic or Latina sexuality, as culturally defined, is linked to assumed lifelong roles in both the family and community. In many instances women’s roles may render them both powerful and powerless. For example, middle-aged and elderly Hispanic women retain important roles in their families, even after their sons and daughters are married. Grandmothers remain present and highly vocal in family affairs and have more status and power than their white American counterparts, who may suffer depression due to “empty-nest syndrome.” Espin is one of the few writers who critically examine the relationship between sexuality, gender, and women’s roles in old age.

In general, research and writings on older Mexican women remain scarce. Aging among Mexican women appears as a uniform process because research has failed to address the lives of older Chicanas in a critical manner. In studies on aged Chicanas the plight of older women is masked by notions of familism. As defined in the literature, that concept embraces familial cultural values of unity and expected mutual aid, respect for the aged, and a positive gender hierarchy considered specific to Chicano families but found among other Latinos as well.

Studies guided by the concept of familism describe characteristics of strength and vitality among older Chicanas, who nonetheless defer to their husbands and male relatives. Generally, older women are viewed from a traditional perspective in which gender differences are neither challenged nor questioned. More specifically, the role of the Chicana grandmother is portrayed as that of the nurturing elderly child-care provider, facilitator of religious and cultural values (cultural teacher), and the main individual in the extended family. Alignments between women, both within the family and outside it, often constitute the core of family networks.

Scholars claim that older women perform a variety of tasks for their families. Nonetheless, familism as an empirical phenomenon, a manifestation of expected mutual aid and support, is changing, although certain elements of it, particularly family unity, still remain. The multigenerational household and extended family do not operate as the literature would have people believe, in part because older women are establishing modified networks with other older Chicanas, not necessarily within their own family. While they still value family unity, it may stem from family resemblance and not from familism or culture but rather from gender and age dynamics.

The value placed on motherhood by most Latinas continues with the transition to grandmotherhood. Current research suggests that older Chicanas find grandmotherhood “confining” and “limiting” and seek ways to avoid meeting the expectations associated with the status. Many women expressed joy and pride on becoming grandmothers, but they were less willing to take on child care.

Gender, also a major component of Chicano familism, continues to manifest itself throughout the life
Aging

cycle. Familism serves to explain and understand women as wives, mothers, and grandmothers. Older women in general struggle with past traditions in the midst of contemporary realities that create contradictions and challenges in advanced age. Although they are socialized with conventional ideas about old age (harmony, status, respect, and solace), the reality of their present lives is poverty, family structural changes, differential life expectancies, and longevity. Older women confront traditions that reinforce a gender hierarchy. Chicano and Latino cultural norms expect older women, whether they are biological or surrogate grandmothers, to conform to the role of caregivers, and they are generally discouraged from seeking male companionship. They are steered instead toward the role of abuelas (grandmothers) and an old age spent as caregivers. Older Chicanas are dealing with conflicting cultural traditions and structural constraints through community organizations, senior-citizen centers, the Catholic Church, and their own families. Within these contexts women actively define or construct varied meanings of aged womanhood.

Among Chicanas attempts to define and resolve issues of womanhood lead to challenging cultural expectations at the risk of being disrespected. Capitalizing on respect is critical because it facilitates the process of self-definition. The family presents a means of support, love, and respect, but stresses conformity and ultimately control. In moving toward alternative definitions of womanhood among older Chicanas, the concept of abuela or grandmother merits attention. The term abuela connotes a romanticized image of a matriarch that only serves to disempower women within their families and in the community. It is interesting to note that when older Chicanas are discussed in the literature, they are almost always referred to as grandmothers. Thus the terms grandmother and older woman are synonymous.

The element of powerlessness lies in the potential exploitation of older Chicanas as convenient caregivers or baby-sitters. While grandmothering is a difficult task, of greater concern are limited views of older women simply as caregivers. The process of establishing oneself as a cultural teacher differs for widowed and married women and involves retaining and capitalizing on the respect granted to older women who conform to the caregiver role. The widowed grandmother respects the memory of her past marriage, remains widowed, and conforms to the nurturer role. Since convention discourages older women from seeking male friendship, this proscription ultimately controls their sexuality. While older Chicanas do have a sense of sexuality, cultural expectations, ageism, and patriarchy define and subsequently influence the expression of sexuality. A widowed grandmother who challenges this expectation risks being judged a “bad” woman, or una mujer sin vergüenza. The dichotomy of the “good” versus “bad” woman serves to ensure that widowed grandmothers will commit themselves to cultural expectations of caregiving. If they do not concede, they risk losing the respect needed to establish themselves as cultural teachers.

The social construction of womanhood for older Chicanas involves reconceptualizing the traditional expectation of caregiving and the role of cultural teacher. Along with other Latinas, Chicana grandmothers are altering such traditional roles and will provide child care out of necessity but not for convenience’s sake. This, in turn, grants them independence and leverage in defining their relationship to the family. Under these conditions child-care services are viewed as important to the family, and grandmothers attempt to construct the caregiver role as familial support rather than a form of control. Nonetheless, their womanhood, with respect to grandmothering, continues to be defined within a traditional context.

The process of socially constructing elderly womanhood also involves utilizing the symbolic respect for the aged. Younger generations are expected to acknowledge the presence of their elders, not render them invisible. They are taught to respect the aged for their wisdom, knowledge, and survival into old age. Older women’s quest for self-definition often depends on their relationship to their children, and requiring respect for the aged places Chicanas in an advantageous situation. It enables them to maintain contact with their children, grandchildren, and, for some, great-grandchildren. Such contact, whether through visits, social gatherings, or caregiving services, allows older women to establish themselves as cultural teachers and subsequently to redefine their womanhood while maintaining positive familial relationships.

As cultural teachers, women socialize grandchildren and/or great-grandchildren with certain cultural values and traditions, particularly their behavior toward older people and the maintenance of the Spanish language. The preservation of traditional music, food, and, for some, religion is equally as important. Older women are thus placed in a position where they can leave a legacy of cultural rather than monetary value.

AGOSTINI DEL RÍO, AMELIA
(1896–1996)

Born in Yauco, Puerto Rico, in 1896, scholar Amelia Agostini del Río grew up a diligent student and avid reader. After completing high school she received a scholarship to study at the University of Puerto Rico's Normal School, from which she graduated in 1917. She was part of a select group of women students being trained mostly as teachers, but her exposure to academic life at Puerto Rico's main center of learning resulted in many friendships with prominent male and female writers and intellectuals of this period. After graduating from the university she worked as a high-school teacher. In 1918 she left the island to further her education at Vassar College. She also studied at the Centro de Investigaciones Históricas and received a doctoral degree from the University of Madrid. Afterward she continued teaching in Santurce's high school for several years, but was also involved in writing, directing, and performing in some theatrical productions.

In 1926 she married the well-known Spanish literary critic Angel del Río, who had been her professor at the University of Puerto Rico. They moved to New York, where her husband taught at New York University and later at the Hispanic Institute of Columbia University. Angel del Río and other intellectuals from Spain were living in exile in New York and Puerto Rico during the years before and after the Spanish civil war and the fascist Francisco Franco dictatorship. These Spanish exiles played a key role in the founding of Puerto Rico's literary world and that of other Spanish-speaking countries. These writings represent a mixture of cultural commentary, autobiographical account, and literary criticism, but most of all, they are a clear testimony of how numerous intellectual friendships shaped and enriched Agostini's life.

An earlier book, Viñetas de Puerto Rico (Puerto Rican vignettes) (1965), is an intimate recollection of the author's years growing up in the small town of Yauco, Puerto Rico, and provides some human-interest stories about a few of the town's most picturesque characters. Her connections to the homeland are also reflected in her poetry collection Canto a San Juan de Puerto Rico y otros poemas (Song to San Juan de Puerto Rico and Other Poems) (1974). She also authored several books of children's stories and songs.

For her many literary and cultural contributions, Agostini was honored in 1973 by the Puerto Rico Chapter of the American Women's Union. She was also elected president of the Sociedad de Autores Puertorriqueños (Society of Puerto Rican Authors).

See also Education


Edna Acosta-Belén

ALATORRE, SOLEDAD “CHOLE”
(1927– )

Soledad “Chole” Alatorre was born in 1927 in San Luis Potosí, Mexico. She came from an upper-middle-class background in Mexico. Her father was an officer in the Railroad Workers Union. At the age of twenty-seven Alatorre immigrated to the United States with her husband and sister. She settled in the San Fernando Valley of greater Los Angeles and began a career working as a bathing-suit model for a clothing-manufacturing company in downtown Los Angeles. Through her work...