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Correction Appended
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Lawyer helped pioneer worldwide Latina group

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Elizabeth Garcia, 48, a lawyer and former Austin resident who helped start a Latina professional group in Austin that grew to 15,000 members around the world, died early Sunday of an apparent accident.

But it was her personality her friends remembered most this week as they reflected on Garcia's life - her signature omnipresent smile, her glass-half-full outlook and her seamless ability to make friends.

"The woman had time for everybody," said Lori Garza of Mission, Garcia's friend since they were classmates in the seventh grade. "Lisa made time when there was no time."

"Usually people have a circle of maybe 10 friends. Elizabeth had a circle of four times as many," said Javier Garcia, her brother.

Garcia died at University Medical Center Brackenridge, according to a spokesman for Austin-Travis County EMS, who said she was found late Saturday near **Waller Creek** in downtown Austin with what he described as very serious injuries.

Austin police said Garcia was discovered about 11 p.m. Saturday in the 100 block of Red River Street and that her death appeared to be the result of an accident. Police did not provide further details and said an investigation is ongoing.

Funeral services are scheduled Friday in San Juan.

According to friends and family, Garcia died from injuries sustained in a fall along the creek, below street level and just east of the Austin Convention Center. A makeshift shrine of roses, floral arrangements and photos of Garcia marked the location this week.

Garcia had been living in Edinburg in her native Rio Grande Valley since 2003, but she regularly visited Austin and attended a party hosted by longtime friend Rudy Colmenero in downtown Austin earlier Saturday.

"She was always happy. Life was positive to her," said Colmenero, an Austin attorney who said Garcia had been his close friend since their time at the University of Texas, where Garcia attained undergraduate degrees and Colmenero got his law degree. Colmenero said he last saw Garcia, accompanied by her fiance, Gary Hughes, on Saturday afternoon at an anniversary party hosted by his law firm.

After getting her law degree from Texas Southern University in 1992, Garcia soon built an impressive resume in the public sector with stints with the Texas Court of Appeals, the state attorney general, the state comptroller of public accounts and the Hidalgo County district attorney's office. Since 2004, Garcia practiced civil and personal injury law in South Texas, most recently as a partner with the firm, Vidaurri, Lyde, Rodriguez and Haynes.

While living in Austin in 2000, Garcia and her friend Veronica Rivera started an informal group of Latina professionals called Las Comadres. Similar local groups had existed around the country for some time, but the small gathering in

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Austin was the springboard for the international network of about 15,000 women known as Las Comadres Para Las Americas.

Nora Comstock, who developed the network, said that in South Texas and Austin, Garcia was known as much for her work in the community as she was for her legal career. Garcia established a UT endowment benefiting bilingual scholars from the Rio Grande Valley, and her passions included the UT alumni association and Longhorn football games .

Garcia was a board member and leader in Texas Rural Legal Aid, advocating on behalf of low-income Texans who needed access to legal help, a spokeswoman for the organization said.

"It's really sad for us to have lost her at such a young age ," Comstock said.

Friends said they were mystified by the circumstances of Garcia's death. Colmenero said he received a telephone text message from Garcia at 10:40 p.m. Saturday, saying that she was leaving a club on Sixth Street to meet him and his friends at another club a few blocks down the street. Garcia never made it.

"I don't know why she was at Cesar Chavez and Red River. The best we can tell is she got on her cellphone. Maybe she stepped off the sidewalk, maybe she lost her footing and went down that embankment," Colmenero said.

Garcia had been divorced for a number of years from Charlie Baird, the former state appellate and trial court judge.

According to an obituary published in The (McAllen) Monitor, Garcia is also survived by her mother, Ercilia Garcia, of Pharr; brother, Gerardo R. Garcia and sister, Anna M. Garcia. Funeral service is scheduled for 10 a.m. Friday at Memorial Funeral Home Chapel. Interment is to follow at Palm Valley Memorial Gardens in Pharr.

Colmenero said Garcia's friends plan a memorial service in Austin at a later date.

Ahora si! reporter Liliana Valenzuela also contributed to this report. Contact Juan Castillo at 445-3635; contact Claudia Grisales at 912-5933. Twitter: @cgrisales

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CORRECTION: A story on Page B1 Friday about the death of Elizabeth Garcia incorrectly reported the name of Texas RioGrande Legal Aid.

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