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MARY HELEN BERLANGA - EDUCATION ADVOCATE

By Manuel F. Medrano

An advocate is a proponent or champion of a cause. Few policymakers in the history of South Texas have been more involved in the cause of educational equity than Mary Helen Berlanga. For nearly three decades as a member of the Texas State Board of Education she has championed educational justice and fairness. There is a Spanish proverb which says "*Camarón que se duerme se lo lleva la corriente*" (The shrimp that falls asleep is swept away by the current). One should never take things for granted or cease to make an effort. What follows is the life story of an educational leader who has never taken things for granted.

Mary Helen Berlanga was born in Calvert, Texas about an hour from Waco. She was the youngest of eight children. Her father, Ruben Bonilla, was born in Mexico City on January 31, 1905 and knew no English when he immigrated to the United States at seventeen. Her mother, Maria Ramirez, was born on August 15, 1905. They married on September 16, 1927. They would become two of her best teachers and staunchest supporters.

Her primary schooling was both academic and sobering. In first grade she remembers her best friend refusing to play with her because she was "Mexican." Berlanga remembers, "I thought it was a disease, so I went to my first grade teacher."¹ Her teacher, regrettably, could not answer her question about the barriers in a segregated school. Her father later questioned the policy and persuaded the school board to allow his older children into the "Anglo school." They became the first Hispanics to attend that school. Although Mary Helen Berlanga was the beneficiary of that precedent, some prejudice persisted.

Even as a young girl Berlanga loved learning and making speeches. On one occasion after she had learned about George Washington and Abraham Lincoln in class, she decided to speak about them at home. In her back yard on a downed mulberry tree, she gave a speech about these Presidents to her pets, the chickens. On another occasion, she decided to build her own office, so she gathered some bricks in her backyard and began "construction." After she told her mother about her plans, her parents built her a playhouse where she enjoyed "the freedom of pretending"² by acting and giving speeches.

Neither of her parents had much formal education, but both recognized its value. They expected their children to excel in school. Berlanga recalls, "Of course, Dad wanted straight A's and Lord have mercy if he ever saw a C on your report card... I don't think we ever had a C."³ Her mother also encouraged her. Once when Berlanga was in second grade, her teacher suggested that she enter a spelling bee. Her mother told her that she had nothing to lose, but could win a ribbon. Berlanga not only entered but won the spelling bee and the ribbon.

In 1958 Berlanga's father suffered a heart attack and within a year the family moved from Calvert to

Corpus Christi, Texas. She and her brother, Ruben, enrolled at Hamlin Middle School. The school counselor promptly informed them that although they had made A's at their former school, they were not in a "country school" any more. She also said that there were few Hispanic children enrolled in Hamlin and that they were competing with outstanding Anglo students. They should expect a drop in their grades. As the children left the office, their father told them not to listen to what the counselor had said. They would continue to excel in school because that was the way they were reared.

After middle school Berlanga attended Ray High School and became very involved in public speaking. She enrolled for speech courses and participated in tournaments and debates. She remembers that her Spanish teacher was outstanding, but "She expected me to know everything all the time; if I didn't raise my hand, she would call on me anyway. It was stressful, but I'm glad she did it because I really listened."⁴ Although her high school experience was at times challenging, it was generally positive.

After graduation she enrolled at the University of Houston and continued the tradition that her older siblings had begun. All had graduated from college. In the Berlanga household attending college was not an option; it was a requirement. Her parents had always told them that education was their salvation and the key to their success in life. It was their destiny. In 1968, during her sophomore year, Berlanga's resolve was severely tested when her father died. He had always told William, his second oldest son, that if anything happened to him it was his responsibility to take care of Mrs. Berlanga and the younger children, and he did. In May 1970 Mary Helen Berlanga received a Bachelor of Arts degree. It was then that her mother once again challenged her to do more. Berlanga remembers her mother saying, "Mary Helen, why don't you go to law school; you got brothers that are practicing attorneys, too... you'd be the first female in our family."⁵ For Berlanga it was an interesting decision to ponder because there were virtually no female attorneys in Corpus Christi. Her mother, however, simply said that it did not matter, and it did not. Three of Berlanga's older brothers, William, Tony and Ruben were already practicing law and she could be just as successful. She soon enrolled at the South Texas College of Law in Houston. Although she originally preferred criminal law, she found her niche in immigration and social security law. Berlanga explains,

"I think immigration law because I knew my parents were immigrants and I knew what they had suffered and I wanted to be able to unite families. I think social security law because it is administrative law and you are helping people who cannot work... because of a disabling condition, whether its mental or physical and I felt like I was giving to those people who needed help and did not have anyone to really help them, did not have anyone to defend them."⁶

She knew that these individuals needed an advocate.

At South Texas Law School there were approximately four hundred students and only ten were women. Berlanga was one of those few and recalls seeing only one other female in all of her classes. The fifteen hour course load was demanding and stressful enough, but because Berlanga was usually the only female, she bore an additional responsibility. She recalls, "You didn't want the males to think you could not keep up with them... in a way that was good because it was more challenging... but it was difficult and it required a lot of dedication and a lot of time."⁷

In 1974 while still in college, she met her future husband, David Berlanga, on Labor Day weekend at a

party her brother Tony Bonilla was hosting. They soon met again at a Fiesta Mexicana that the League of United Latin American Citizens was sponsoring. They dated for a brief time and for Christmas that year David gave Mary Helen a stocking with a doll inside. At the bottom of the stocking was a small box with an engagement ring. In May 1975 she passed the Texas State Bar Exam, and on June 6th they married. After their honeymoon in Puerto Vallarta, Mrs. Berlanga returned to practice law with the Bonilla Law Firm in Corpus Christi and Mr. Berlanga began his doctoral studies in bilingual education at Texas A&M University in Kingsville, graduating in 1976. Throughout thirty-four years of marriage, they were strongly committed to improvement education.

Their first child, Christina Maria, was born on September 28, 1976. Less than one year later, the Berlanga twins, Monica Lisa and David were born on September 19, 1977. Mary Helen Berlanga recalls,

“Well, when she (Christina) was just a few months old, I started feeling sick and they told me I was pregnant... Well, at six months I said I’m just not feeling very well and the doctor said what we’re gonna have to do is a scan on you.”⁸

From the scan the doctor confirmed that she was carrying twins. She readily admits that both her mother and mother-in-law were instrumental in helping care for their three young children. Cathy, her fourth child, was born on February 14, 1980. With her own children Berlanga realized that “all children in this world have a gift, but I wanted to see if they could find their own gift, or sometimes we had to nourish to find out what that gift was.”⁹

In January 1983 she was elected for her first term on the Texas State Board of Education becoming the first Hispanic to ever be elected. She soon championed what would become her trademark cause for over a quarter of a century, a quality education for all the children of the state of Texas with no discrimination “from one student to another or from one campus to another with access to the same textbooks, computers and software, libraries and the best teachers.”¹⁰ Initially, some State Board members believed that South Texas children did not need the same materials or to meet the same expectations as children from other regions of Texas. One associate commissioner, Vicki Burgen, said that Hispanic children were born with less capacities. Berlanga forcefully replied,

“You’re telling me that these children that I represent are not capable of reading the material that you’re preparing for supposedly the kids in your district? I’m sorry; I totally reject that I will not be a part of this. I want the same material as I would for all of the children across the state and that was the first line of battle. That lady was Denise Bernard. Shortly after that, I did walk out in the State Board (room). I had other Board members, sometimes Republicans, walking out with me.”¹¹

She demanded hiring only certified teachers and denounced the attempts by the State Board to adopt “watered down” books and curriculums.¹²

Over the years Berlanga worked tirelessly to empower the State Board and various Texas communities to understand the diverse needs of the student population. One venue for achieving this was through the textbook adoption process. She recalls,

“I’ve faced a situation of the lady that comes up to me and says ‘I want to make sure that you’re going to include my great great grandfather Stephen F. Austin,’ and I say yes ma’am. I just want to make sure that the people who were here to greet him are also included in the book... We’re not trying to steal anybody’s history; were just trying to be accurate. This is a very important part of the work.”¹³

Berlanga remembers examining proposed textbooks that included only negative information about the Aztecs and other pre-Columbian civilizations and argued that they were also great scientists and mathematicians. In some books the slavery issue was virtually excluded because according to one Board Member “it’s not nice for children to read about slavery, you know; maybe we can say a little bit less about it.”¹⁴ She responded by saying that if children don’t know about the institution, how can they understand its later impact on issues such as discrimination? Additionally, photographs and illustrations about women and minorities were virtually excluded in those textbooks; however, females and Hispanics, for example, contributed to and participated in all of the U.S. wars since the American Revolution. Her point was, of course, that a more inclusive view of people and events in history was required to give students a better understanding of the past.

Mary Helen Berlanga continues to champion the rights of immigrants and the rights of students throughout Texas, sometimes despite personal tragedy. Her husband, David, died on April 20, 2009 two weeks before their thirty-fifth wedding anniversary. The November before, he commented about her legacy to education and to him. He said, “She always put students first; she always put teachers first. She always has fought for their rights... To me her legacy is that she has been a wonderful mother; she has been a wonderful wife and she is the love of my life and my partner.”¹⁵

What does she consider her legacy as an advocate? She replied, “I would like to think that I have somehow helped a child or children to take the challenge to either pursue a career or pursue their dream and know that they can be proud of who they are.”¹⁶

She has done that and much more, and all the children of Texas are better for it.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Interview with Mary Helen Berlanga on November 14, 2008
- 2 Berlanga interview Nov. 14, 2008
- 3 Berlanga interview Nov. 14, 2008
- 4 Berlanga interview Nov. 14, 2008
- 5 Berlanga interview Nov. 14, 2008
- 6 Berlanga interview Nov. 14, 2008
- 7 Berlanga interview Nov. 14, 2008
- 8 Berlanga interview Nov. 14, 2008
- 9 Berlanga interview Nov. 14, 2008
- 10 Berlanga interview Nov. 14, 2008
- 11 Berlanga interview Nov. 14, 2008
- 12 Berlanga interview Nov. 14, 2008
- 13 Berlanga interview Nov. 14, 2008
- 14 Berlanga interview Nov. 14, 2008
- 15 Interview with David Berlanga interview Nov. 14, 2008
- 16 Berlanga interview Nov. 14, 2008

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