

Our founder Dra. Antonia Pantoja

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Dra. Antonia Pantoja was born in San Juan, Puerto Rico in 1922 and studied at the University of Puerto Rico where she obtained a Normal School Diploma in 1942. Upon graduating from the University of Puerto Rico, she worked as a schoolteacher for two years in Puerto Rico where she cultivated a profound interest in education and addressing the needs of disadvantaged children. She arrived in New York City in November 1944 where she got a job as a welder in a factory making lamps for children. During these years which involved long hours of hard work, Dra. Pantoja was awakened to the harsh experience of racism and discrimination against Puerto Ricans and how this community lacked the knowledge and political power to overcome these and other challenges in the United States. She became an activist in the factory, providing information to other workers about their rights and how to organize a union. These were the most formative years of her life. But within a few years, the women who welded pieces of filament for submarine radios would rise to weld together a fragmented community, a community much in need of leadership and vision.

After great personal initiative that included doing extensive research on academic scholarships, Dra. Pantoja received a scholarship from Hunter College, City University of New York, where she completed a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1952. She went on to acquire a Master of Social Work in 1954 and was bestowed a Ph.D. from the Union Graduate School, Union on Experimenting Colleges and Universities in Yellow Springs, Ohio in 1973.

Her most profound contribution to the Puerto Rican community in the United States began in 1958 when she joined a group of young professionals in creating the Puerto Rican Forum, Inc. which paved the way for the establishment of ASPIRA in 1961. ASPIRA was Dra. Pantoja's dream, but it was not the only organization she help build for the Puerto Rican community. In fact, as early as 1953, Dra. Pantoja, then a graduate student at Columbia University, joined a group of students and created the Hispanic Youth Adult Association which later became the Puerto Rican Association for Community Affairs (PRACA). In 1970 she wrote a proposal and secured funds to establish the Universidad Boricua and the Puerto Rican Research and Resource Center in Washington, DC and in 1973 became its Chancellor. For health reasons, Dra. Pantoja moved to California in 1978 to become an Associate Professor at the School of Social Work, San Diego State University. There, in collaboration with another successful educator, she founded the Graduate School for Community Development in San Diego, an institution that served communities and neighborhoods throughout the nation. She became the President of this organization, devoted to imparting people with knowledge and skills necessary for problem-solving and restoring their communities. She was involved in a variety of community and professional organizations, all working toward the goal of building stronger Puerto Rican and minority communities, including the Ford Foundation, the National Urban Coalition, the Museo del Barrio, the National Association of Social Workers, the Council on Social Work Education and several other groups and organizations.

Dr. Antonia Pantoja talks about her history and vision.

Her most notable contribution-the creation of ASPIRA- in 1961 was the result of considerable hard work and collaboration with educators and social work professionals who shared her concern" with the high dropout rate of Puerto Rican youth in New York City during the '50s and '60s. The organization flourished into a major national organization dedicated to empowering communities and especially Puerto Rican youth to have a say in and control of their future.



Dr. Pantoja's work has not gone unnoticed. Virginia Sánchez-Korrol, Professor of Puerto Rican and Latino Studies at Brooklyn College and Co-Editor of the forthcoming *Latinas in the United States: An Historical Encyclopedia*, has called her "one of the foremost figures in community activism from the 1950's to the present." In 1996, Dr. Pantoja received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest honor bestowed upon civilians by the United States government. She became one of only four Puerto Rican recipients of the award, which has also been presented to Governors Luis Muñoz Marín and Luis Ferré, as well as Sr. Isolina Ferré.

"One cannot live a lukewarm life," Dr. Pantoja has said. "You have to live life with passion." After nearly sixty years as an educator and activist, she continues to display that passion and vigor. In 1999, she interrupted work on her memoirs to return to New York City and lend her assistance to a new initiative. Alarmed by reports of threats to the city's bilingual education system - a system which she was instrumental in initiating - she worked to raise awareness about the value of nurturing students to be proficient in multiple languages.

In 2000 she appeared on a panel discussion on "Latinas Making History" at a hotel in midtown Manhattan. A small woman with a powerful voice and no-nonsense attitude, she wears a poker face that breaks periodically into a beaming smile. "I am for the fact that our children must learn English for their livelihood, and because they should know that other language of the place where they live," she explained. However, she described the "total immersion" of Spanish-speaking students in an English-only environment, as "a stupid, stupid thing," "If we already bilingual," she asked, "why should our children lose their language and only speak one language, English?"

Unapologetic for her forceful opinion, she added, "Sometimes people think that you shouldn't express yourself directly and say what you're thinking, but you have to. You have to be open and direct and say what you mean. Call things by their name." This was Antonia Pantoja. She left us on May 24th., 2002.

More information about her biography available [here](#) [2].

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