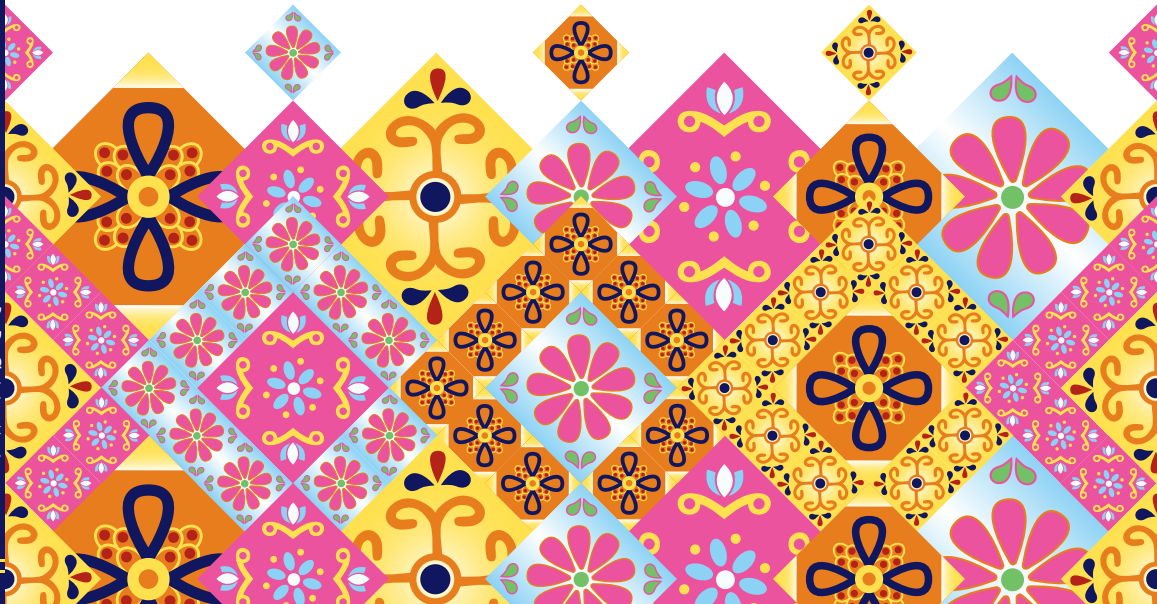
ARIZONA LATINA TRAILBLAZERS

Our history

Our story

Stories of Courage, Hope & Determination

Vol II



Arizona Latina Trailblazers

Stories of Courage, Hope & Determination

By Dr. Christine Marin

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By
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Published by
Latino Perspectives Media
and
Raul H. Castro Institute

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Phoenix, Arizona

Edited by: Maria Enciso, Micaela Rios, Michelle Klinger / Phoenix College

Designed by: J. Alfredo Hernández / Phoenix College

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Printed in the United States of America
April 2010

INTRODUCTION

As educators, social workers, labor leaders, entrepreneurs, scholars, judicial representatives, homemakers, nurses, ranch wives, or political representatives, Latinas and Hispanas have not been strangers in Arizona's history. It is important that their stories be recalled and remembered, and that we recognize their long-standing contributions to the development of our state as we approach Arizona's 100th anniversary of statehood in 2012. After all, these women are among the state's "trailblazers," women who established a strong social, cultural, and political presence prior to Arizona's statehood.

They are women from the families of Tomás de Belderrain, Mariano Urrera, Manuel de León, and Manuel Ygnacio de Arvizu—men who served as military officers in their Spanish presidio in Tubac in the 1750s. They are women whose families established large ranches as early as 1821 in southern Arizona—families like those of Francisco and Leopoldo Carrillo and Manuel Amado. We should know about Latinas like Pancha Acuña and her daughter Faustina, who were already in the Arizona Territory in 1863, accompanied by family members who came to the Prescott area to join in the gold rush. Or Juanita Bachichia, who established a boarding house for gold miners in 1864 on Lynx Creek in central Arizona's gold district. We know about Mexican women like Trinidad Mejía Escalante Swilling, the "Mother of Phoenix," who came to the Salt River Valley in 1867 and made her first home in Wickenburg. And we know that Anson P. K. Safford, who served as Arizona's territorial governor from 1869 to 1877, met and married two Mexican women: Margarita Grijalva of Tucson, who died in 1880, and Soledad Bonillas, and made them representatives who oversaw the governor's official territorial home. And we must not overlook the women who, along with their families, settled in the rough and tumultuous copper-mining areas like Clifton-Morenci, Globe-Miami, and the Bisbee area by the early 1900s.

The trailblazers that we honor in 2010 have established their own unique presence in Arizona's modern history. Their collective voices give meaning to our lives because their own lives shed light on the power of women's work and value. The power of their actions resolved matters of injustice, racism, poverty, inequality, school segregation, and unionism. And so we honor them and all that they represent as women, as heroines, as leaders, and as sisters. We must not forget the names of Julia Cecilia Cuesta Soto Zozaya, Plácida Elvira García Smith, Dora Ocampo Quesada, Alicia Otilia Ocampo Quesada, Anna Marie Ochoa O'Leary, Carmela Ramírez, and Barbara Rodríguez Mundell—Latina Trailblazers.

Carmela Ramírez

Producer, Actor, Vocalist, and Arts Advocate

"It is still a tremendous pleasure for me to have the opportunity to touch people through song, a well-orchestrated production, or arts education. It can change your attitude, your life, make you laugh, cry, or you can simply lose yourself in the moment." – Carmela Ramírez

Carmela Ramírez was born in Phoenix in 1952, a time when the city was growing into a booming metropolis, attracting many with its economic opportunities and warm climate. As a first-born daughter to artistically gifted Mexican American parents, Carmela was heavily influenced by dreams of a vibrant life filled with art and music.

Carmela's parents, Eddie and Ortensia Ramírez, were passionate about the arts. Eddie, who worked for the City of Phoenix parks maintenance department, also played the trumpet and sang with Mexican trios. Ortensia, noted for her vocal talents and beauty, was often sought after as an artist's model. However, it was difficult to earn a living through the arts in Phoenix in the 1950s, so they eventually gave up their artistic pursuits in order to concentrate on raising their children, Carlos and Carmela.

Courtesy of Carmela Ramírez

Carmela Ramírez; 1969, North High School theater production

Eddie and Ortensia both helped Nana Carmen Ruiz run the family-owned restaurant and cantina, Las Palmeras. When the restaurant

was sold, they went to work at one of the most popular music clubs in Phoenix, the Riverside Ballroom. Ortensia worked as a hat-check girl, and Eddie became a bartender. The exciting venue attracted talented artists like Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, and Tito Puente, and other great Latin jazz and salsa bands that were taking the nation by storm. Ortensia's job allowed her to keep Carmela close by in her crib, listening to the memorable performances.

In 1957, the Ramírezes became the second Mexican American family to move into a new suburb in West Phoenix, just north of 32nd Avenue and Van Buren. Carmela and her brother soon became fluent in English. Carlos learned to play the drums, and Carmela furthered her interest in music, listening to jazz on the radio with her father. When Carmela started first grade, she and her brother were among the few Mexican American students attending J. B. Sutton Elementary School. After school, they would take a bus to South Phoenix to stay with Nana Carmen. This upbringing allowed Carlos and Carmela to experience a life filled with a mix of cultures and languages.

Through middle school and high school, Carmela embraced various art forms, but her love for music never wavered. She listened to her father's records and enthusiastically spent her allowance to add to the collection. She tried her hand at acting, and although initially unsure, she found that she loved it. She also loved painting and drawing and wanted to become an artist. The multitalented Carmela wanted to express herself.

In 1969, Carmela's mother insisted that she enter a pageant competition for the reina of the annual Fiestas Patrias, a grand celebration held to commemorate Mexico's independence. She wanted Carmela to experience a

Courtesy of Carmela Ramírez

Carmela Ramírez

Courtesy of Carmela Ramírez

Carmela Ramírez and "Straight City"

big stage and gain exposure, hoping one day she could achieve her dreams of becoming an artist. Carmela took to the stage and wore with pride a beautiful purple velvet dress handmade by her mother. She won the competition; other successes and opportunities to develop her talents would soon follow.

Carmela graduated from North High School, where she won many speech competition awards and held the leading role in various school productions, adding writing and directing to her repertoire. Her plays were at times controversial; Carmela and the school principal had many discussions about the content and borderline issues. This was Carmela's first foray into arts advocacy.

After high school, Carmela attended Phoenix College on a drama scholarship. She studied under noted theater director Dr. John Paul, and continued her speech competitions and studies under Diane Rood. The college provided Carmela with a nurturing environment that allowed her to grow as an artist. She was now traveling nationwide and was writing and directing her own plays as part of student projects. Phoenix College also provided Carmela's first exposure

to musical theater. She tried this new medium and found that she had a voice equal to, if not better than, other musical actors. As Carmela's vocals matured, her burgeoning talent influenced her old high school sweetheart's band. Carmela became the lead singer, performing a mix of rock-'n'-roll and rhythm and blues. The band was very successful, and Carmela eventually left her studies to pursue her new career with passion.

Throughout the '70s, Carmela opened for national headliners such as Tina Turner, Melissa Manchester, Herbie Mann, and B.B. King. She also studied sound engineering, lighting, staging, and logistics, and by the 1980s, Carmela had formed her own award-winning bands: Straight City as well as Linda & Carmela and Phases. Both exemplified some of the finest live music in town. Soon she established her own production company and artist roster and began to produce small shows around the Valley.

The City of Phoenix soon took notice of Carmela's achievements, and in 1987, she was offered a part-time job in the Arts and Culture section of the Parks division. Carmela was immediately intrigued by the prospect of working with the community and producing shows in larger venues. She successfully produced the afternoon concert series Sights and Sounds, and the Phoenix Symphony People's Pops Concert Series. Within three years, she was offered a full-time position as director of the Phoenix Center for the Arts, a visual and performing arts facility. This new appointment allowed Carmela to formulate a center for performing arts that would feature arts education, visual arts gallery exhibitions, the creation of a performing arts academy for youth, visual and performing arts for seniors, arts therapy for special populations, after-school arts programs, and the production of festivals and special events in the inner city.

Wanting to fulfill a dream Carmela had for many years, in 1988, she created Carmela y Más, a vibrant Latin jazz and salsa band. This Latin band soon gained recognition Valley and nationwide, garnering performance awards, raving

Courtesy of Carmela Ramírez

Carmela Ramírez and "Straight City;" 1976

reviews and accolades from *Phoenix New Times*, *Soundboard*, *Arizona Republic*, *Cambio Magazine* and more. Carmela y Más soon received personal invitations to perform in Washington, D.C., at the National Museum for Women in the Arts and as guest artists for the 100th anniversary of the Himeji Castle in Japan. In 1999, Carmela returned to her love of R&B and jazz and created The Diva Band, featuring Carmela and Susan Phelan as lead vocalists and Rebecca Kennell on backgrounds and trumpet. The band has performed in various venues around the Valley and Southwest.

As a volunteer in 2000, Carmela helped the newly formed City of Phoenix Latino Institute create programs to improve the quality of life for Phoenix residents of all ages and cultural backgrounds. To this day, Carmela's work with the institute reflects her dedication to the community and evidences her talents as an experienced producer and devoted civil servant.

Carmela has received many awards for her work and dedication. In 1999, she was recognized by the Friend of the United Nations Awards Program. She has also received several City Excellence awards and *Phoenix New Times* Best of Phoenix awards in Jazz/R&B/Fusion and Latin music.

Carmela's parents wanted her to live a vibrant life full of music and art. As a producer, actor, vocalist, arts advocate, and civil servant, Carmela Ramírez has fulfilled her parents' hopes and dreams. As a talented artist in her own right and dedicated arts administrator and advocate, she has touched and enriched countless lives.

Courtesy of Carmela Ramírez

Carmela Ramírez

As educators, social workers, labor leaders, entrepreneurs, homemakers, nurses, ranch wives, or political representatives, Latinas and Hispanas have long been at the forefront of Arizona's history. It is important that we recognize the impact of their individual contributions and imperative that their collective stories be recalled and shared, especially as we approach Arizona's 100th anniversary of statehood.

The life journeys of these women are filled with compelling stories that reflect the strength of their vision, their courageous actions, and their thoughtful advocacy. Their outstanding leadership formed strong cultural cornerstones, laying the foundation for women in leadership roles today.

And so we honor them and all that they represent, pioneers who forged our rich cultural heritage and strong role models.

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