

**ARIZONA** *Our history*

*Our story* **LATINA**

**TRAILBLAZERS**

Stories of Courage, Hope & Determination

Trailblazer Series Vol VI





## *María García*

### Planting Seeds for Social Change



While living in Phoenix during the 1940s and 1950s, María García stood out as a woman who courageously spoke up for social issues, even though she was an immigrant and carried a heavy accent. Born in 1898, María grew up in Chihuahua, Mexico, and later attended the Instituto Científico y Literario. She became a school teacher and by the early 1930s, María moved to Yuma where she worked at the Immaculate Conception Catholic School as a teacher's aide.

During the early 1930s, María met Albert García, whom she later married. In 1937, Albert earned a law degree and the couple moved to Phoenix and joined the small Mexican-American middle class. In the late 1930s Albert became Arizona's first Latino Assistant Attorney General.

María's class standing didn't preclude her from taking an interest in the lives of

those who were not as fortunate. While in Phoenix, María met Plácida García Smith, who directed a social service agency called the Friendly House. The Friendly House opened as a settlement house in the primarily Latino Grant Park barrio in 1922. It focused on Americanizing immigrants through English and citizenship classes, and training immigrant women in preparation for employment.

The women shared a common bond when it came to bettering the circumstances of the Mexican-American community. In the 1930s and 1940s, Latinos composed 15 percent of the population, with Anglo-Americans in the majority. It was in this setting that María and Plácida came together in 1940 to found Phoenix's first chapter of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), Council #110. LULAC was a civil rights organization founded in 1929 that emphasized patriotism



and integration into the American mainstream, but also vigorously denounced discrimination and pursued equal treatment of Mexican-Americans. María formed the Council's "Discrimination Committee," and it didn't take long for María and her committee to roll into action following an incident in Tempe where an unwritten segregation policy resulted in two Mexican pilots training at Williams Air Field to be denied entrance to the Tempe Beach pool.

María and the committee pursued the issue through the court. The case went to trial in 1943 and a federal court ruled that the segregation of residents of Mexican descent from the Tempe Beach pool was unconstitutional, but the Tempe Beach Committee refused to cooperate. Three years later, the pool's segregation policy was successfully abolished thanks in part to the earlier work of María and the discrimination committee.

María continued to fully support the Friendly House's role as a place where people could come to learn English and civics. She advocated for the Friendly House to be allowed to offer citizenship classes. María, along with others, formed the agency's Americanization Committee and secured materials to

teach citizenship classes in the evening to accommodate those who worked. These classes welcomed immigrants of all backgrounds. At the end of the program, the new citizens were encouraged to register to vote.

María also advocated for women to become educated, to learn English, or to enroll in job training classes at the Friendly House. One of the main purposes of the agency was to provide domestic training and job placement for immigrant women. María championed the idea of creating an "apartment" in the Friendly House with modern appliances included, so women in training could get practical experience in operating these machines before they went out for domestic jobs.

In the late 1940s, the Garcías continued to push the boundaries of the city's racial restrictions and moved into a home in the primarily all-white Coronado neighborhood. María's nephew, Charlie García, recalls "I always call her the Rosa Parks of the Mexican community because she was very adamant about our place in society." The Garcías were among a few families who began to move into non-Mexican areas and initiate the gradual process of integration.



The Raul H. Castro Institute (RCI) is proud to have a role in preserving the significant contributions made by the 2014 Arizona Latina Trailblazers. This vision of the the Raul H. Castro Institute is to improve the quality of life for the Latino community in Arizona by bringing focus to priority issues of education, health and human services, leadership, and civic engagement – all areas in which these Latina Trailblazers have created a tremendous and lasting impact. Through the use of this book in educational settings and through its availability as part of the Arizona Memory Project, their legacy will be perpetuated as generations of leaders continue to be inspired by the spirit and actions of these pioneering women. It has been a privilege to tell their stories.

To learn more about the lives and achievements of the 2014 Arizona Latina Trailblazers, please visit

**[www.azlatinatrailblazers.com](http://www.azlatinatrailblazers.com)**

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**Interviews with:**

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## *Latinas' Stories Remain Important in Arizona's History*

As educators, social workers, labor leaders, entrepreneurs, scholars, judicial representatives, 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.

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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