

A Life of Activism: Maria Jimenez

By Denise Gomez



Maria Jimenez participated in a University of Houston rally for city controller candidate Leonel Castillo who won the election, making him the first Latino elected to city-wide office in Houston.

Photo courtesy of Carlos Calbillo.

In May 1957, Maria Jimenez arrived in Houston, having just left her native Coahuila in Mexico to reunite with her father. Her family settled in a small Magnolia Park home near Maria's school, Franklin Elementary. There, as a first grader, she experienced her first dose of anti-Mexican sentiments. Within the halls, classrooms, and playgrounds, school officials forbade Maria and other students to speak Spanish lest they face expulsion. In moments of kindness, one teacher, who noticed Maria's confusion, secretly instructed her in Spanish so she could understand the directions. Contrastingly, Maria remembers speaking in Spanish to other Latino children who threatened to report her. The environment was "repressive...the access to anything that was Mexicano was very limited," she recalled. The denial of language and culture was the first, most obvious form of discrimination thrust upon her. It impacted every aspect of her life and set her on a path of life-long activism.¹

Maria's school teachers insisted on mispronouncing her last name, Jimenez, in a more Anglo-friendly way with a hard "J" sound rather than the natural soft "H" sound in Spanish. Her classmates openly made jokes about lice-infested Mexicans and clearly rejected the en-

try of Mexican families to their communities. Sociologist Tatcho Mindiola Jr. found that many Chicanos, second and third generation Americans, had negative attitudes toward native Mexicans or recent immigrants from Mexico because the Chicanos "[did] not perceive themselves as belonging to the same ethnic group." Further, denying Mexicanos the use of their native language inhibited communication between the two groups.²

Houston had two theaters that played films in Spanish and only two churches that allowed Mexicans to worship there. A badly-maintained "Mexican park," Hidalgo Park, was designated for Mexican children who were forbidden to play at nearby Mason Park. The only exception to the park's segregation policy was to let Mexicans swim in the pool for a few

hours on the day it was cleaned.

While Maria's parents expected her to master English in school, they fully immersed her in their Mexican culture at home. To combat the restrictions she faced on speaking Spanish outside the home, Maria's parents insisted that she use only Spanish at home. In many ways her upbringing was traditional and very family-oriented,

*"I'm a Mexica,
I'm a Chicana, and
I'm a Gringa...
I am a U.S. citizen."*

— Maria Jimenez



Maria Jimenez has dedicated her adult life to improving the lives of others, following the principles laid out by the social movements of the 1960s. Here she listens to family and friends of NAACP field secretary Medgar Evers speaking outside his Jackson, Mississippi, home where he was assassinated in 1963 as violence against civil rights proponents escalated. This was one of many stops on the 2003 cross-country Immigrant Workers Freedom Ride, modeled after the 1961 Freedom Rides.

All photos courtesy of Maria Jimenez, unless otherwise noted.

and her family proved influential in shaping her views. Even after migrating to the United States, her family maintained their closeness with Mexico and often visited for holidays, weddings, and funerals. The limitations imposed by her parents included no dating and no jobs. While her boundaries were strictly set, they were not intended to confine her, however; instead they enforced what her family believed should be her number one priority: education.

By observing her mother, Maria learned “how to deal with absolute power...[M]y father was that absolute power in the household and she would figure out how to organize and get things done.” Maria cites her mother’s strength as coming from her own mother. Maria’s grandmother emphasized that women’s role “was not just to be at home and have children, that women could do other things...that household work wasn’t romantic...that it was hard work.”

Always emphasizing the importance of education, her father defended his children’s opportunities—especially for the girls. Maria grew up hearing her father’s friends ask, “Why are you insisting the girls go to college? They are going to grow up and get married.” The reality was Maria and her generation were simply expected to follow a more domestic path, but her father’s rebuttal aligned with a very possible reality. “No, if they marry poorly, they can have the option of leaving,” he replied, although Maria believes his true reasons were more progressive. Regardless, no doubt ever arose that Maria and her siblings would attend college.

Above all else, her parents placed a high priority on education because her father had only reached the seventh or eighth grade and her mother half of that. When Maria showed an interest in her high school’s debate team, which required costly contests and out-of-state excursions, her father supported her. While she proved a natural orator and generally did very well, judges’ prejudices at times prevented her from winning. Recalling the discrimination, she noted, “One specifically said, ‘How could we let this Mexican girl win?’...There were actual moments where this rejection was definitely there.” She also missed college scholarship opportunities because

Mexicans were ineligible. Her father’s frugality and commitment proved beneficial, though, and he fully funded her higher education.

Even as Maria’s father showed the utmost support, school advisors discouraged her. From the age of thirteen, she knew she wanted to pursue political science as a field of study. Her counselor responded, “That’s not for you, you should study sociology,” implying that Latinos had no future in politics.³ Contrary to her advisor’s prediction, Maria definitely had a future in politics and was catapulted into becoming a Chicana activist not by a single event but rather by the combination of systemic segregation and racism.

Arriving at the University of Houston, Maria quickly noticed an isolating, small Mexican presence on campus, estimated at 400 out of 29,000 students, and decided to join a political organization. The Young Democrats



Maria Jimenez speaks to the crowd gathered at a march on May Day 2012 after carrying the Antorcha Guadalupeana, the torch for immigrant rights and dignity.

piqued her interest and quenched her thirst for political involvement. “The United Farm Workers came in to organize the lettuce boycott and through those contacts I became part of the first committee that worked directly with Cesar Chavez in organizing the boycott in Houston,” Maria said. But I was dissatisfied with the Young Democrats; it was mostly electoral politics. They were focusing on general issues and not necessarily issues of the Mexican Americans.”

Maria was also deterred from joining the League of Mexican American Students (LOMAS) because she believed that it wasted time on social activities rather than important political ones. As students radicalized their politics, the leadership of LOMAS, Tatcho Mindiola, Ramon Villa Gomez, Lupe Rangel and others, birthed the militant, politically-focused Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO). Maria left the Young Democrats and found her place with MAYO saying, “[MAYO] was what I wanted to be a part of. I wanted to be a part of this movement.”

MAYO played a significant role in cementing the status of Mexican American students at the University of Houston by challenging the inequities they faced, bringing in cultural programs, and creating an atmosphere where Mexican culture could be praised instead of suppressed. Appraisal of the culture was exemplified by the establishment of the Center for Mexican American Studies (CMAS) in 1972 and, the next year, by commissioning a Chicano mural in the student center’s Cougar Den, where Latino students gathered and socialized.⁴ “[MAYO was] a movement that tried to basically recover that which had been denied, like our cultural pride and our language and a look back through our history. It was very much parallel to the Pan-African movement. We were moving toward a Pan-Latino movement...a cultural renaissance,” Maria explained.

MAYO adopted aggressive, confrontational tactics characteristic of the other minority groups with whom it collaborated, like the Black Student Union. The white feminists on campus became MAYO’s allies in spite of the feminist groups’ reputations for radical demonstrations. “There were many stimulating conversations with the white feminists ... [and] we fought to get women’s history [at UH],” Maria said. She remembered the National Women’s Conference in Houston in 1977. Sponsored by the U.S. State Department, the conference invited delegates from each state and territory to adopt a plan of action “for the federal government to improve the status of American women.”⁵ Maria saw it as “sort of a clash between the Latinas who wanted to be strictly part of the feminist movement and those of us who wanted to be part of the Chicano movement and fight for women’s rights within the context of fighting for the rights of all members of the community.”

As someone familiar with the face of sexism, Maria found common ground with the white feminists and focused on female-specific issues, to the chagrin of her peers. Often she faced criticism from fellow Chicanos and Chicanas. “I got criticized...but I always defended



Maria Jimenez participates in a demonstration to renegotiate terms of the union contract for Service Employees International Union Justice for Janitors Campaign at the Galleria in Houston, February 2010.

it...The fight for the equality of women is the fight of the people of Mexico....They would question me about being a feminist and supporting the gringos who destroyed the culture.” When accused with betraying her heritage for flaunting “gringo” attitudes, Maria cited the history of Mexican women and revolutionary women from her grandfather’s books and quoted feminist writers like Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, a seventeenth century nun, self-taught scholar, writer, and proponent of women’s rights, particularly the right to an education.⁶

Maria’s political activism extended to all, Mexican or not, in need of support against authoritative powers. “[In] the farmworker fight...you dealt with economic inequality, you dealt with union organizing and how the capitalist system worked in terms of the struggle of the farmworkers against agribusinesses connected to the government,” she contended. That experience helped her gain “a broader perspective of the Chicano movement as a step towards equality but not necessarily the end itself.” Farmworkers did not receive Maria’s support because they were mostly Latinos; she backed them because they faced the same economic and social stratification that she experienced as a result of her heritage and gender. The Chicano movement and MAYO gave her a starting point for addressing these issues. She insisted, “I was a Mexican and a Chicana, I fought for that first...because that was my community. But I’m also a woman so I had to fight

for that...The whole issue of income inequality would fit with poor whites and blacks. I didn't have a problem with that...By the time I graduated from the university it was very clear in my mind that [the movement was] not just an issue of discrimination but of social inequities."

After graduating from UH, Maria married and returned to Mexico but did not abandon the struggles in Houston, rather, her work continued. Her husband at the time introduced her to major players in Mexican leftist politics and together they became involved in leftist circles and the labor movement. Her experiences in Mexico during this time differed from earlier periods because she settled in the Yucatan Peninsula, an area closer to Central America with distinct minority populations.

Maria worked on economic projects with the Mayas in the Yucatan. She tried learning Mayan and participated in community meetings conducted fully in Mayan. Her grasp of the language was limited because of its difficulty, but she noticed when her presence became the topic of discussion among Mayan leaders. During those occasions she drew similarities between the use of Mayan in Mexico with the use of Spanish in the United States as a form of protection against a dominant group. She reflected, "It brought me into the contradictions of being the dominant as opposed to being the minority when dealing with indigenous Mayan communities."

Southern Mexico exposed Maria to Salvadoran, Honduran, and Guatemalan influences and prepared her for her return to the United States where the Central American immigrant population was growing steadily. "When I left the United States there were no Central Americans in Houston," she said, "but when I came back [I] saw Central Americans." Her first jobs thrust her into Central American communities where she got to know several women migrants and helped unionize Honduran

Maria Jimenez speaks at a news conference at Hidalgo Park in Houston's East End to announce a local march and a delegation traveling to Washington, DC, to join the national march for comprehensive immigration reform in 2010. The March for America drew approximately 200,000 participants to the National Mall.



Maria Jimenez participated in the South Texas Human Rights Center Water Stations project, replenishing water stations to prevent migrant deaths due to exposure and dehydration. Shown at left with Maria in April 2014 is Eddie Canales, director of the STHRC, and center, Pedro Blandon, a paralegal with the Texas Civil Rights Project.

janitors with the Service Employees International Union. Through the Immigrant Law Enforcement Monitoring Project of the American Friends Service Committee, Maria documented abuses of authority and formed coalitions to work on documentation systems in border areas. The second report published by the project became law. She added, "Section 503 of the 1990 immigration law...included our recommendations...[to] develop enforcement of the INS and the border patrol to develop clear policy on the use of deadly force...[W]e documented about 30 immigrants that they had shot."

Another issue Maria dealt with was the Immigration Control and Reform Act of 1986 that "included provisions to legalize resident undocumented immigrants who could prove they had lived continuously in the United States and had entered the country before January 1, 1981."⁷ Those who provided proof could receive work visas that offered the same security as a permanent residency. This proved unfair and unrealistic for migrants who were forced to cross the border regularly and hid from the government because they lacked documentation. Maria noted, "From one day to the next, 400,000 immigrants nationwide became undocumented." After several lawsuits against the 1986 regulation, temporary residence was given to immigrants only to be revoked in 1996.

Immigrants' outrage at this revocation resulted in the formation of ARCA, the Association for Residency and Citizenship of America. After noticing a violation of the 1986 law on one man's deportation order, Maria sprang into action. With 100 rented chairs and 300 people in

attendance, Maria held a meeting and told them, “The only thing you can do is organize and try to get your own law through Congress. We will help you organize.” By the second weekend Maria had fifty volunteers to place in committees. Within four weeks, internal leadership had formed, conducted meetings, and created an ARCA webpage. Soon they were 1,000 strong and steadily raising money. She recalled, “They were particularly motivated... the leadership was very smart. The only thing I did was... direct them...[as] an organizer does.” Over the course of three years Maria trained ARCA members in contacting Congress members and formed new ARCA branches across the country.

The undocumented ARCA members became citizens, and the majority of them remain active politically. Maria contended, “They became active participants in the political process even before they became permanent residents and now their citizenship means a great deal because they continue to be active in voting and caucuses and political affairs...They know it because they had to go through it, they understand it.”

But the immigrants were not the only ones educated by the process. As organizer, Maria quickly learned multi-lingual communication is key, and the use of it is “often a process of bringing democracy within structures.” This insight proved vital in her work with ARCA when the organization became national and more diverse. The San Jose branch, composed of Sikhs from India, was often present for national ARCA meetings and mobilizations to Washington along with Houston’s predominately Latino base. The two groups had the same goals as immigrants but the cultural boundaries remained. Maria pointed out, “If we don’t have an interpreter there, many of the immigrant participants will start to leave.



Mentoring the next generation is critical to sustained community action. In May 2015 Maria Jimenez engaged in a pre-planning meeting convened by young community social justice activists for envisioning a community organizing school in Houston to be called Casa Blue.

We would stay in the same hotel but we would have to do two different meetings, one with the Latinos speaking Spanish and then a different meeting...[in] Punjabi.” This made building relations difficult.

The distinctions covered a range of differences, including everyday cultural practices that were often overlooked, like greetings. Latino immigrants shook hands furiously, from the beginning to the end of the meetings, whereas the Sikhs did not shake hands at all. Organizing Sikhs were predominately male, where Latinos brought entire families. But they also dealt with politics and allegiances in their home countries. A point of contention for Mexican immigrants was their alignment with Cubans. “While they may be united in terms of viewing the need to speak Spanish as a right...or the right to education as an issue,...don’t touch pro- or anti- Castro positions.” Maria explained that it becomes complicated “because you are organizing many different levels of complexity in a multi-cultural, multi-lingual situation.”

Maria draws attention to the fact that immigrants cannot vote, asking, “How can you establish your presence and petition the government and [apply] pressure?” But political activity is not defined exclusively by elections. It begins with people, ideas, street activity, and “civil disobedience if necessary,” as Maria put it. She described their work as grassroots, “We are the ones who aren’t shy about organizing the street protests and the marches. Each one does a different type of work but it is characteristic of a social movement...You can march separately but we need to hit together.” In addition to the electorate Maria emphasized the importance of daily politics, of meetings and communication for minority communities like Latinos because otherwise it becomes a remote experience, “That’s where we are weak and...the anti-immigrant movement always beats us, because we don’t have that experience.”

Maria helped immigrants establish their own authentic American identities, similar to the way she crafted her own. When asked how she identifies herself, Maria said, “I’m a Mexica, I’m a Chicana, and I’m a Gringa...I am a U.S. citizen...some of the attitudes I hold are really American.” Maria shares with all American immigrants an experience of dual identity. Her guidance allowed immigrants to acquire citizenship without compromising native identities, to organize within established communities and conduct meetings in arterial languages. When she first became an organizer, she told her advocate friends, “You spoke for the people affected...I can’t do that...it’s very easy for me to go into the Rio Grande Valley and then scream about the border patrol abusing somebody but I don’t live in the Valley, I don’t have to live with border patrol.” She realized it was not enough to help people change legislation; she had to show them how to do it themselves. Maria empowered the people she worked with and impacted communities before touching legislation, and that is where everlasting change begins.

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