

A small red building stands out on Navigation Boulevard, luring customers inside with the mouthwatering scent of freshly cooked tortillas. Upon entering, the restaurant's loyal customers see red and white walls decorated with honors and recognitions, one of Houston's best menus, and, usually, a line. The family-owned restaurant Villa Arcos was established in 1977 by Velia Arcos Rodríguez Durán (1922-1986) and continues to thrive today under her family's care. In 1986 her daughter Yolanda Black Navarro purchased the business and, upon her passing in 2015, it was handed down to her only child, Christian Navarro.¹

Velia was born in San Antonio, Texas, in 1922. Growing up there, she inherited her cooking skills from her mother, who was from the Arcos family in Hondo, Texas. Velia always worked in small restaurants or *panderías*. In 1939 she moved to Houston's Second Ward (East End), where she raised six children – four girls and two boys – and became an active member of Our Lady of Guadalupe Church.²

Through the church, Velia got to know “Mama” Ninfa Lorenzo, who at the time owned a tortilla factory and later became a widely known restaurateur, especially among Tex-Mex aficionados. Like Mama Ninfa, Velia opened her restaurant at a time when Mexican restaurants were few in number and primarily served Mexican communities. This differed greatly from Houston's current culinary scene, where Mexican and Mexican-influenced foods are celebrated and cuisines from across Latin America can be found easily.³

Villa Arcos enabled Velia, as a single mother, to provide for herself and her children. By choosing to open a restaurant, she utilized skills like cooking that she and other women already used in their daily lives at home. In addition, Velia found herself in an overwhelmingly positive environment with little competition. Coupled with perseverance, there was little chance for failure. Velia began first by gathering investors and parties willing to contribute money toward her goal of one thousand dollars to purchase a building and equipment.⁴

Villa Arcos opened in 1977 “by word of mouth,” servicing mostly Latino truck drivers and acquaintances, operating

Yolanda Black Navarro: East End Reina

By Denise Gomez



Yolanda Black Navarro (1947-2015): mother, grandmother, sister, businesswoman, community leader, activist, and advocate for others.

All photos courtesy of Christian Navarro unless otherwise noted.

from five in the morning to three in the afternoon, and manned by Velia, a cook, and a lady who made tortillas. Initially the restaurant's customers ordered and were served at a window on the side of the building, but it has since expanded to include an indoor dining area and, recently, outdoor seating.⁵

Velia's eldest daughter, Yolanda, who had graduated from the University of Houston and was working for Southwestern Bell at the time Villa Arcos opened, helped her mother on weekends by writing checks, making deposits, and minding the financials. Later, under Yolanda's direction, the restaurant came to reflect her political activism and began to attract customer-politicians such as then Houston City Council Member Melissa Noriega, Harris County Commissioner Sylvia Garcia, and Mayor Bill White. The stimulating political discussions attracted people to Villa Arcos just as much as the delicious tacos. Although Yolanda died three years ago, her legacy continues to grow, which is hardly surprising after a life filled with accomplishments that impacted the community.⁶

A native Houstonian, Yolanda grew up in a two-story house at the corner of Palmer and Navigation Boulevard, next to where Villa Arcos stands today. Childhood memories include bus trips downtown, as well as visiting Wayside and Harrisburg Streets and Settegast Park. Parks offered space for her family's great Easter celebrations attended by all the aunts, uncles, and cousins on her mother's side of the family.⁷

Yolanda received her primary school education at the historic Our Lady of Guadalupe School and then proceeded to the all-girls Incarnate Word Academy. Although she remembered growing up in a predominately Hispanic community with Hispanic-serving schools, as a child she was unaware that she herself was Hispanic and therefore different from the majority. In her eyes, her peers were “just kids growing up.” Reflecting on her youth, Yolanda believed her surname, Black, had the potential to hide her ethnicity because it did not sound “stereotypically Hispanic or Mexican American.” Yolanda first confronted a sense of ethnic discrimination in high school. Although she was a very involved and successful student, she could sometimes



One of six children in her family, Yolanda attended school at Our Lady of Guadalupe and Incarnate Word.

the first time, were able to donate time and raise money for political campaigns. The Viva Kennedy campaign launched in support of Senator John F. Kennedy's presidential bid targeted and succeeded in capitalizing on the Latino vote and mobilizing those voters. Yolanda's introduction into grassroots political work included going door-to-door to encourage people to vote on behalf of the Kennedy campaign. Afterwards Yolanda was briefly involved with the Political Association of Spanish-Speaking Organizations (PASO), a regeneration of the Houston Civic Action Committee (CAC) that organized Viva Kennedy Clubs and supported his election. These seemingly small, early tasks impressed young Yolanda with a sense of community belonging that directed her entire life.⁸

Yolanda's family constantly encouraged her to pursue higher education, which instilled in her an extreme desire to go to college. As a high school student, she lacked access to the resources a child has today, and as a minority woman,

sense a change in other people's looks and body language when it became clear she was a Latina.

Yolanda first became politically involved during her teenage years. Two of her uncles, brothers Alfonso and Guadalupe Rodríguez, were active members of a plumbers' union—Guadalupe actually served as president of the Plumbers Local Union 68, and Alfonso was the subject of a book, *Chicano Go Home!*, written by Tomás Lopez. The Rodríguez brothers joined the huge wave of Latino American citizens who, for

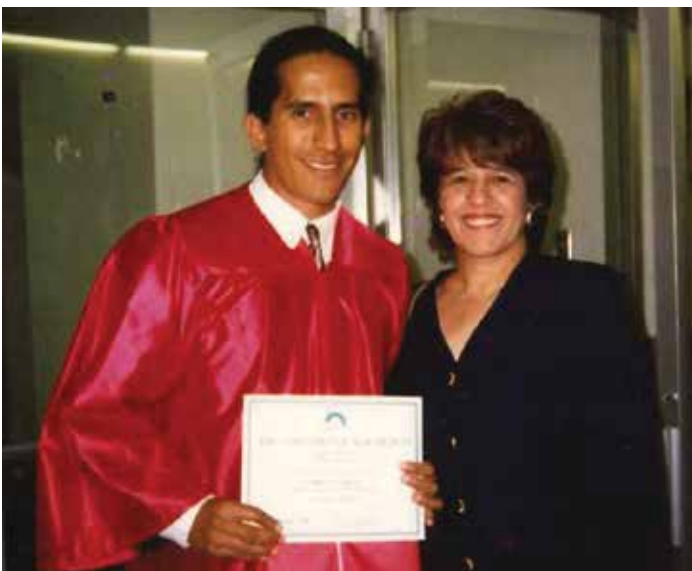
she had big hurdles to overcome. Undeterred Yolanda enrolled at the University of Houston in 1964 with intentions of becoming a lawyer, although she switched her major to business administration. Initially she took on a full course load but had to lighten that after a year because she felt she needed to work and help her family financially. She enrolled in night classes and worked full-time during the day, graduating in 1973 with her beloved year-old son, Christian, and a bright career ahead of her.⁹

After graduating Yolanda worked for the Texas Employment Commission, followed by brief stints at Stude Construction and Humble Oil Company. She sought assistance in her professional development through the Minority Women Employment Program, whose mission was to help minority women obtain corporate positions. Through this program, which was an expanded version of black women's employment programs, Yolanda found a position with Southwestern Bell (now AT&T). The Women's Bureau had a program, Minority Women in Leadership, that helped Yolanda secure her position at Southwestern Bell. The first black woman to head the bureau, Elizabeth Duncan Koontz, took her position in 1969, and throughout the 1970s, the bureau focused on bettering working conditions for women and ending discrimination for working minority women.¹⁰

Yolanda entered the workforce at a time when women were encouraged to remain in traditional roles—if they were not stay-at-home mothers, they were expected to take jobs in the service industry, teaching, nursing, or clerical work. Those that did seek jobs in male-dominated spaces faced prejudice at every turn. Often white male employers looking to fill managerial positions had a preconceived idea of who made the ideal candidate: a college-educated white man, with a bachelor's or business administration degree. Generally, women were seen as less qualified, and especially minority women, who had to deal with prejudices surrounding their gender and ethnicity or race. Employers openly worried whether language barriers or cultural differences posed future problems, specifically for prospective Latino employees. Even with a college degree in hand, Latinos held lower-ranked managerial positions on average.¹¹

Yolanda's career at Southwestern Bell spanned almost twenty-four years, from 1974 to 1997. Yolanda first manned positions ensuring quality customer service as a group manager, until she moved into another department, Real Estate Management/Building Operations, concerned with maintenance, air conditioning systems, and the like. Here she not only held a managerial position, but she held it over men, a nontraditional position for a woman that presented both a significant change and a challenge. In spite of the era's prejudice surrounding women in the workforce, Yolanda happily remembered her time at Southwestern Bell and was thankful for the positive experience.¹²

Mistreatment of minority groups was not limited to workplaces and often tensions played out in the very spaces that were meant to be a community's safe haven. In a notorious case of Houston police brutality, officers were convicted of negligent homicide in the 1977 death of Jose Campos Torres, which preceded the Moody Park riots in response a year later. As park goers congregated to celebrate Cinco



Yolanda's son, Christian, received his bachelor's degree from the University of New Mexico in 1995. He completed his law degree at The University of Texas.



Yolanda Black Navarro and her dear friend Lolita Guerrero attended the 2011 AAMA Gala. An honored community leader, Guerrero is the community liaison to Texas Senator Sylvia Garcia.
Photo courtesy of AAMA.

de Mayo, a fight broke out and the police were called. A confrontation erupted between the officers and park goers, who reportedly overwhelmed the street, destroyed properties, and started fires. Police arrested forty people. Yolanda recalled similar issues of brutality during confrontations between police officers and black Houstonians on Dowling Street. Although she did not witness these clashes, she remembers reports indicating that they were caused by the use of aggressive tactics by police officers, resulting in situations she described as “police versus community.”¹³

As a concerned community member and activist, Yolanda was among the founding members of two important local organizations. The first was the Association for the Advancement of Mexican Americans (AAMA), formed in 1970, alongside other influential Mexican Americans—Froilan Hernandez, Roland Lorenzo, and William Navarro—concerned with the East End’s social problems, ranging from drug abuse to school dropout rates.¹⁴ Her personal motivation for forming this organization was to help children. Yolanda felt that children in the community did not have enough recreational or extracurricular options to keep them busy and away from drugs and trouble. Since its establishment, the association has been very successful. Its first grant, received in 1971, was for \$40,000. AAMA’s projects focused on meeting the Latino community’s needs and facilitating social mobility. In 1973, the George I. Sanchez Charter School was founded. One of the first charter schools in Texas, the Sanchez school serves at-risk students in pre-kindergarten and grades six to twelve. A drug prevention program followed three years later. In 1976, AAMA established its adult education program, Adelante, which focuses on adult literacy, GED preparation, and ESL services. In 1991, AAMA partnered with Houston Independent School District (HISD) to prevent dropouts.

During this time, Yolanda also worked with different programs recruiting women, especially disadvantaged women, into better jobs.¹⁵

Always looking for new opportunities, Yolanda opened a business for a brief amount of time, near the location of El Mercado del Sol (Alexan Lofts today), where she sold goods from Mexico.¹⁶ In 1987 she teamed up with other business owners to form a non-profit organization, the Navigation Area Business Association (NABA), which is still in operation, to give back to their neighborhood. A celebratory Hispanic Festival was the first project organized by the association, which ran for two years at a time when Houston had few such events. The group’s success and duration can be credited to like-minded, dedicated Houstonians like Yolanda.

The idea for NABA’s biggest project was born during a casual lunch when Yolanda spoke with her friend Bill Woodby of Navigation Bank. As he told her about his childhood memories of walking to school without shoes, he wondered how the two of them could help kids today facing the same problem. After much discussion and brainstorming the two had an idea: gifting shoes to children in need around Christmas time.

They gave their idea a name, “Shoes for Kids,” and sent letters to their contacts. In its inaugural year in 1988, Shoes for Kids met at Ripley House and serviced fifty families who enjoyed dinner and gift baskets. The kids, of course, received brand new tennis shoes. The program continues to be held at Austin High School, where approximately 2,300 children received shoes in December 2017 with the support of the Navigation Area Business Association and local business owners. At least 30,000 pairs of shoes have been donated to Houston families through the program, and it is amazing to think how many lives have changed as a result of two friends meeting for lunch.¹⁷

Mayor Bob Lanier, who served Houston from 1992 to 1998, appointed Yolanda to the Houston Parks Board where she served three mayors across fifteen years. She particu-



In 2009 Yolanda, with Sanchez high school students, attended the ribbon cutting for the new AAMA Learning Center, which houses Sanchez Charter School. One of Texas’s first charter schools, Sanchez serves pre-K and sixth through twelfth grade students, including dual credit and workforce readiness courses through Houston Community College, along with other services.

Photo courtesy of AAMA.



Yolanda and Bill Woodby conceived the idea for Shoes for Kids to give children shoes around Christmas time, with support from the nonprofit Navigation Area Business Association (NABA) and other community members. At least 30,000 pairs of shoes have been donated as of 2017. Photo courtesy of NABA.

larly enjoyed serving on the board because of the positive impact parks have on people’s quality of life and because parks offer spaces for families and children to spend time together, as she remembered from her Easter celebrations.¹⁸

The need for parks was one of the issues Yolanda focused on when she twice ran for office. In 1997, she ran in Houston’s general election for Council Member At-Large Position 1 against six other candidates. Annise Parker, who later held several city positions including mayor, won and Yolanda came in fourth place. When Felix Fraga’s term expired, Yolanda ran for District H against four people. Although she made the runoff, Gabriel Vazquez won that race despite not having nearly the connection to the East End that Yolanda had. Regardless of the results, she did not regret running and maintained a positive perspective on both races. The two campaigns were invaluable learning experiences for her, especially in understanding the difference between being the voter and the person receiving the votes, learning more about issues, and recognizing mistakes she may have made. The issues she focused on mirror her life’s work: community concerns about safety, security, infrastructure, equality, jobs, and education.¹⁹

Yolanda also believed in clarifying what “Latino community” meant. Historically it was safe to assume “Hispanic,” “Latino,” or “Spanish” could be used interchangeably to refer to Houston’s Mexican population, and although each word had been used in different contexts for different purposes, they usually described the same thing. In Yolanda’s eyes it was necessary to clarify who were members of the Latino community, which included Mexican Americans as well as immigrants from South and Central America. Immigration was a strong issue that bound Latinos from different places together through a shared experience.

The Esplanade on Navigation Boulevard, a strip of land located in front of the Original Ninfa’s Restaurant and other eateries, was revitalized and reopened in 2013. The

goal of the update was for the Esplanade to become, once again, “*el corazón de la comunidad*” or the heart of the community. The new esplanade has connections to the Houston Ship Channel, which provides many jobs for Houstonians, and is decorated with “faux wood benches, artistic bike racks, picnic tables shaded by some large trees, and a sculpted anchor.” Without a doubt the esplanade looked beautiful, but it lacked something important in the eyes of Yolanda and other community activists.²⁰

The design had nothing representative of the East End’s Latino culture despite its rich, well-known influence on the area. The community largely felt ignored and replaced. Suggestions for a more accurate representation of the area ranged from a visible use of the Spanish language or more vibrant colors traditionally associated with the culture. Locals argued that people come to East End because of its relationship to Latino culture. Yolanda asked for better communication as well as a final product that represented East End’s culture and history.²¹



Yolanda, pictured here with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, became a force in politics, recognizing the growing importance of Latino voters and officeholders, as well as those who supported issues important to the Latino community.

Yolanda intervened in a similar situation, one year later, for Guadalupe Plaza. Driving down Navigation, Yolanda noticed that Guadalupe Plaza had been invaded by bulldozers. As it turns out, the Greater East End Management District (GEEMD) decided to renovate the area which, according to the GEEMD, “received virtually no use by the community and was occupied by homeless people.” What angered Yolanda was that the management district had not consulted the area’s businesses, much less the people, and the GEEMD took action without notifying the community. Instead of a green space, Yolanda advocated for something to serve as a tribute to the community’s Hispanic heritage and history. In response Yolanda and the Houston chapter of LULAC coordinated a press conference to alert the media, protesting the way in which the GEEMD disregarded the community. Eventually the GEEMD renovated the space while maintain-



Yolanda takes a swing at a piñata during the East End Foundation's PiñataFest on Navigation Boulevard. The foundation is dedicated to highlighting the area's unique Latino culture, connecting the community through education, arts, culture, the local economy, and heritage.

ing its historic integrity, and Yolanda organized the creation of decorative panels of notable Latino Houstonians like Ninfa Lorenzo, Yolanda's mother, and the Fraga family, detailing their life and contributions to the East End.²²

Even a partial list of Yolanda's accomplishments and honors is long and impressive. She was appointed to the Metropolitan Transit Authority Board and the Land Assemblage Redevelopment Authority; served as co-chair of the Mayor's Hispanic Authority Board; was a founding member of Latina PAC and LULAC 634 and a member of the American Leadership Forum, El Centro de Corazón, the Greater Hispanic Coalition, and the Hispanic Women in Leadership. She received the Hispanic Heritage Award



Respected community leaders Yolanda Black Navarro and Felix Fraga were named Reina y Rey (Queen and King) at the Second Annual Street Fest in the East End on October 19, 2013. The festival was held on the recently completed Navigation Esplanade, near Villa Arcos.

Photo courtesy of AAMA.

for Lifetime Achievement, the Willie Velasquez Community Service Award, and the East End Chamber of Commerce Small Business Award; was recognized as a Woman on the Move and a member of The Mujeres Legendarias of Houston; and the City of Houston celebrated November 3, 2015, as "Yolanda Black Navarro Day." In 2013, she received the fitting title of "East End Reina."²³ The list could and does go on.

Recently Yolanda posthumously received two more recognitions for her dedication to Houston. In October 2016 Houston Independent School District (HISD) held a celebration to rechristen one of its schools the Yolanda Black Navarro Middle School of Excellence. (It was formerly named for the Confederate general Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson.) By using Yolanda's name, HISD better represented its values and, at the same time, honored a local hero. Of course naming the school for a Latina carries great significance as Yolanda's life not only offers inspiration but also serves as an example of the possibilities for other Latino/a students. In addition, Harris County Precinct 2 working with Buffalo Bayou Partnership converted a former East End construction site into a beautiful ten-acre park, Yolanda Black Navarro Buffalo Bend Nature Park, with ponds, trails, and native flora for locals to enjoy and honor Yolanda's contributions and civic leadership.²³

Above all else Yolanda was extremely devoted to engaging her community, celebrating Latino American heritage, and empowering families. In her lifetime, she saw Latinos move from isolated enclaves to neighborhoods throughout the city and country and witnessed the increased influence of the Latino vote compared to the days of her youth. As a woman who remembered looking up to and working alongside "Houston's firsts"—meaning some of the city's first Latino leaders—she talked of her community's voting strength, its political presence and buying power, describing the community as a "sleeping giant." She believed that the percentage of Latinos in Houston should be reflected in the percentage of Latinos holding political office as well as management and other high-level positions. Houston has seen a big change in the last few decades, but a great deal of work remains to be done.²⁴

Yolanda was one woman effecting change for her family, her community, and her city, in addition to the wider history of Latinos in the United States. Just a few decades ago, the idea of a woman like Yolanda—independent, entrepreneurial, educated, politically active, unapologetically Latina American—was difficult, if not impossible, to envision. In many ways she is an example of trailblazing and perseverance, of a person who experienced change firsthand and also drove it. In the simplest terms, she was an everyday person who did extraordinary things, and her legacy in the city of Houston continues to grow.

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