



Texas State Senator Carol Alvarado spoke for fifteen hours to demonstrate her opposition to voting restrictions that would make voting more difficult for people of color and people with disabilities. During the 2021 filibuster, Alvarado could not lean on the desk, sit, or take bathroom breaks.

Photo courtesy of Senator Carol Alvarado.

Exposed to labor organizing early in her life, Maria Jimenez continued to fight for fair labor policies and joined the Service Employees International Union "Justice for Janitors" campaign in 2010 at the Houston Galleria.

Photo courtesy of Houston History.



# Houston's East End and Two Activists Who Shaped It

By Andres Rios

Loving one's community often inspires action to improve it. Activist Maria Jimenez and Texas Senator Carol Alvarado both grew up in the East End and graduated from Milby High School roughly a decade apart. They recognized the social, economic, and environmental disparities in their neighborhood, especially in communities of color where systemic racism remained prevalent. Inspired by leftist political action, Jimenez became a renowned community organizer, guiding her community against anti-immigrant policies and taking these concerns to Washington, D.C. On the other hand, State Senator Alvarado advocated for the improvement of community infrastructure, the environment, and women's issues through electoral politics. Both women have significantly improved the East End community and beyond.

## Maria Jimenez

At age sixteen, Maria Jimenez was exposed to Mexican American political mobilization during the 1966 Starr County Melon Strike. Working in the

Maria graduated in the top 5 percent of her Milby class and attended the University of Houston where her activism continued to grow.

Photo courtesy of The Buffalo, 1969.



Immaculate Heart of Mary's Catholic Youth Organization, she observed fellow members donating money and food to strikers in the Rio Grande Valley. Although she could not take part in the march, her experiences as a Mexican woman growing up during segregation informed her activism. Born in 1950 in Coahuila, Mexico, Jimenez and her family moved to the predominantly Anglo Magnolia Park neighborhood for her father's work as a machinist. Most industrial workers from Mexico immigrated to Chicago, but Jimenez's father disliked its cold climate and its distance from Mexico, so he chose Houston instead. Thus, Maria's family moved into a little home on Avenue I, close to Franklin Elementary School.<sup>1</sup>

Raised in a time when anti-Mexican sentiments reflected public opinion and institutional policy, Maria experienced this as a core part of her upbringing. Houston's public facilities, including swimming pools and parks, barred Mexicans, defined legally as White, from enjoying spaces open to non-Hispanic White residents. Hidalgo Park was the designated "Mexican park" and in noticeably worse condition compared to the "Anglo" Mason Park, which Mexicans could only use once a week to swim for a few hours before the pool was cleaned.<sup>2</sup>

Franklin Elementary prohibited students from speaking Spanish, even if they needed to use the restroom. Fortunately, during first grade Maria received help secretly from her Spanish-speaking teacher who whispered assignment instructions to avoid getting caught. Perhaps surprisingly, other Latino students also reflected anti-Mexican attitudes and policies. Maria observed, "Everybody knew



*Jimenez, an officer of Milby's National Forensic League debate team, dealt with discrimination at competitions.*

Photo courtesy of *The Buffalo*, Milby High School yearbook, 1968.

there was a great deal of difference in terms of how society ridiculed and treated you, and we were careful in terms of our relationships.”<sup>3</sup>

Maria's family encouraged her to learn as much as she could and pursue higher education. Prioritizing her education was a progressive idea for many Latino families of her generation. Her father wanted her to maintain financial independence in case of divorce, and her mother made it clear that women had opportunities beyond the home. At Milby High School, she proved herself as a powerhouse debater and received financial support from her father to attend competitions. An officer of Milby's National Forensic League debate team, Jimenez and her Anglo partner won several contests but lost many others due to the judges' prejudices against Mexicans, especially Mexican women. “How can we let that Mexican girl win?” wrote one judge in her comments.<sup>4</sup>

These experiences drew Maria toward Chicana feminism and activism, but the different ways her parents were raised also radicalized Maria. Her mother lived securely, while her father's side suffered during the Great Depression when her grandfather was repatriated to Mexico. This and her father's union activism inspired Maria to pursue political science by the time she reached thirteen.<sup>5</sup>

Maria attended the University of Houston (UH) between 1969 and 1974, where she sought political outlets that advocated for Mexican American rights during the Chicano Movement. She joined the Young Democrats and participated in the nationwide lettuce boycott, led by the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee against the Teamsters union because they failed to compensate workers fairly or provide healthy working conditions.<sup>6</sup> Maria was part of the first committee working with Cesar Chavez to organize the Houston boycott.

Maria shifted from the Young Democrats to focus on Mexican American issues through confrontational politics, joining the Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO) on campus, which emphasized cultural pride and community involvement. She participated in one of her first protests when Congressman George H. W. Bush spoke at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church. MAYO collaborated with several Black

activist organizations, fostering connections between similarly oppressed communities of color to address their needs.<sup>7</sup>

While at UH, Maria wrote a controversial piece in the *Papel Chicano* newspaper criticizing the sexist notion that women were better suited to domestic roles. In response to backlash it received from Chicano activists, she argued that “the history of Mexico is the history of the fight of women for equality.” The backlash explained why Chicana feminism was needed to address the issues neglected by the separate Chicano and feminist movements.<sup>8</sup>

In 1986, former president Ronald Reagan passed the Immigration Reform and Control Act which penalized employers for knowingly hiring undocumented immigrants but also provided avenues for lawful permanent residency. However, in 1996, the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) increased penalties for crimes committed by undocumented immigrants or for those who overstayed their visas, making over 400,000 immigrants undocumented overnight.<sup>9</sup>

These events led to formation of the Association for Residency and Citizenship of America (ARCA), a coalition of local residents and community organizers advocating for immigrant rights. Jimenez organized a meeting, expecting one hundred people to attend, but over three hundred came, many of them long-term residents who had a lot to lose. At the second meeting, Jimenez invited community members to form a committee, telling them, “The only thing you can do is organize. Try to get your own law through Congress, and we will help you organize.”<sup>10</sup> She likened herself to a coach coordinating a team, using her previous experience to guide them.

ARCA drew thousands of people nationwide to advocate for themselves, and in May of 1998, over a hundred members visited members of Congress in Washington, D.C. regarding the policy. ARCA members also traveled to major U.S. cities with prominent immigrant communities and educated them on their legal rights, taught them to work together, and offered opportunities to meet and communicate with Congressional members.<sup>11</sup>



*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.



*Maria Jimenez assists with the South Texas Human Rights Center Water Stations project, replenishing water stations to prevent migrant deaths due to exposure and dehydration. Shown left to right in 2014: STHRC director Eddie Canales, Pedro Blandon, Maria, and John Carlos Frey.*

Maria later joined the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) and founded the Immigrant Law Enforcement Monitoring Project (ILEMP), which documented violent enforcement of immigration laws in border towns. For sixteen years, she organized coalitions that monitored areas like the Rio Grande Valley, El Paso, Tucson, and San Diego while communicating with Congress to improve immigrant rights. These efforts proved effective through the implementation of Section 503 of the Immigration Act of 1990, which forced the INS and Border Patrol to develop a clear policy on the use of deadly force, train officers on enforcement standards, and create a system to file complaints. Jimenez and AFSC organized communities in Central America and other regions to ensure immigrant rights protections, emphasizing organizing over advocacy. “We have to think about how we develop structure so that when we disappear, they will continue to work . . . [to] have a better effect,” Maria pointed out local community advocates best understood how to address their concerns.<sup>12</sup>

Maria Jimenez passed away in 2020, but not before profoundly impacting thousands of people, including her twin children, Carlos and Stalina. Maria’s daughter, Dr. Stalina Emanuelle Villarreal, is a political “activist,” shaped by her mother’s politics. She recalled how “loud and relentless” Jimenez was, always ensuring her voice was heard. Jimenez inspired Stalina and her brother to become outspoken and confident. Through their participation in political rallies, Jimenez’s children adopted egalitarian values from their mother, which Stalina manifests through her artwork. She does not participate in traditional street activism but believes art has the power to subtly influence the mind and compel the viewer to interpret the work. “Becoming an artist was a way to protest and find my own light amid her big shadow,” Dr. Villarreal said, adding, “. . . I think without my mom, I would have been an artist but not the activist I am now.”<sup>13</sup>

Despite the mother and daughter’s different styles of political activism, Villarreal found her unique voice that serves as an honorable legacy to her mother. Jimenez shaped her children’s beliefs and political activism to foster compassion towards others in ways that she did not always experience in her youth. Maria positively shaped the lives of people in the East End, throughout the United States and Latin America, and the next generation.

## Senator Carol Alvarado



*Carol Alvarado attended Milby High School from 1983 to 1986.*

*Photo courtesy of The Buffalo, 1986.*

As a preteen, Carol Alvarado spent time after school helping her godfather, Mario Quiñones, organize his city council campaign. “I was licking envelopes, stuffing envelopes, helping to build signs, working the polls on election day, and I loved it. I was hooked at an early age,” she fondly reflected. Her father was a member of the Cement Mason’s Union, and the family participated in strikes. Indeed, political involvement became common throughout her early life.<sup>14</sup>

The Alvarado family, Carol described, was like other traditional Mexican American households. They attended St. Alphonsus Catholic Church, and Catholicism became an important part of her life. She played kickball and baseball with the neighborhood kids and sat in ditches telling stories. Everyone enjoyed biking to the convenience stores to buy snacks—usually candy and pickles. “Your neighbors were almost like your extended family. The mothers of the other kids looked out for you,” she said, recalling how safe she felt growing up in her neighborhood in the 1970s. Alvarado attended John R. Harris Elementary and Deady Junior High School, where the student body seemed to be evenly split

*Carol Alvarado and then UH Center for Mexican American Studies (CMAS) director, Tatcho Mindiola, attend a Houston History launch in 2011. Alvarado credited CMAS with helping her find her home away from home and creating an environment where Chicano history could be remembered.*

*Photo courtesy of Houston History.*





*Alvarado, seated at right, became heavily involved with the University of Houston's Mexican community on campus, including the Mexican American Student Organization.*

Photo courtesy of the *Houstonian*, University of Houston yearbook, 1990.

between Anglo, Mexican American, and Black students, in contrast to her majority Mexican American neighborhood. Nonetheless, she found the environment familiar with “Fiesta Day,” for example, when elementary students participated in *baile folklórico* dancing. She enjoyed spelling bees, writing, and history. Alvarado attributed the school’s close proximity to the “family environment” it fostered.<sup>15</sup>

Alvarado’s family rarely ventured outside their Manchester neighborhood, other than to visit her aunts near Greenspoint Mall in North Houston. These trips highlighted the disparities between her neighborhood and that of her aunts’ “They have sidewalks, not ditches. Their streets [were] nicely paved . . . [and] they didn’t have funny smells every time they walked out of the house,” in reference to the odors from the East End’s chemical refineries. Neighborhoods along the Houston Ship Channel are disproportionately lower-income communities of color, where many residents cannot afford to move, lack health insurance, and are at an increased risk of cancer, respiratory diseases, and other ailments. These concerns pushed Alvarado towards a career in public service.<sup>16</sup>

Alvarado graduated from Milby High School in 1986. Thinking back on high school, she joked that she had troublemaking tendencies but had lots of fond memories with her friends from different neighborhoods. She participated in drama club and competed in University Interscholastic League (UIL) tournaments. She took pride in the fact that, for the first time, Milby’s drama club placed highly for a play they performed. Outside of Milby, she belonged to the Magnolia Park Sharks, a youth organization with football, drill, and dance teams. She danced with girls from her school and placed as part of the Magnolia Sharkettes drill team. Alvarado attributed her teamworking skills as a politician to her participation in these organizations, where she learned to rely on others, share wins and losses, understand each

other’s strengths and weaknesses, and facilitate positive connections with her peers.<sup>17</sup>

Alvarado received a B.A. in political science and a master’s in business administration at the University of Houston. Transitioning to the university was initially daunting, but Alvarado’s involvement with the Mexican American studies program made her feel less alone and gave her a space to meet other Chicana/o students and develop close connections with several of her professors. “They wanted to make sure that we knew the history [of] our place in this state and in this country. The books we read reflected that” at a time when history textbooks rarely mentioned Mexicans in Texas.<sup>18</sup>

Alvarado became president of the Mexican American Student Organization (MASO), one of the early political organizations she led, that organized actions on and off campus. They participated in Houston Independent School District (HISD) meetings and advocated for better building conditions at Austin High School, which opened in 1936 in the East End and had small classrooms, poor food quality, and limited books. Eventually, Alvarado mobilized MASO to walk out with Austin students to protest these conditions.

Alvarado and her sister Yolanda volunteered at Planned Parenthood where she witnessed severe harassment – which was typical at their locations – mostly by men against women who sought the clinic’s services. In response, Alvarado walked women from their cars to their appointments, and this radicalized her advocacy on reproductive health. Today, Senator Alvarado serves on the Planned Parenthood of Houston and Southeast Texas Board.<sup>19</sup>

Before running for Houston City Council, Alvarado worked for Congressman Larry Green in Washington, D.C. On her return, she ran an economic development project with the East End Chamber and the Association for the Advancement of Mexican Americans (AAMA) and spent four years working directly for Mayor Lee Brown. When she ran for city council, she became the first woman to represent



*Carol Alvarado and local activist and preservationist Kirk Farris at the dedication of the Texas Historical Commission marker for El Barrio del Alacrán in Second Ward, where many Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans settled, in the early twentieth century.*

Photo courtesy of Patrick Feller, Wikimedia Commons.

District I. She felt her most notable achievement on council was passing a citywide antismoking ordinance, which initially banned smoking in restaurants and bars and later banned indoor smoking altogether.<sup>20</sup>

Alvarado focused heavily on improving local parks, creating a fund supporting a new skate park in Eastwood. Mason Park's beautification project included a gazebo, which hosted President Bill Clinton in 2008. When reflecting on Alvarado's childhood experience playing in ditches and observing differing conditions between neighborhoods, it is not surprising she prioritized beautification projects, particularly in the East End.

After six years, Carol Alvarado succeeded Rick Noriega in the Texas House of Representatives from 2009 to 2018. She adjusted to this new position with ease. By her third session, she became part of the Calendars Committee, which determined the priority of legislative bills and resolutions. Alvarado enjoyed her time as a Texas House member and believed its busy atmosphere was more easygoing than in the smaller Texas Senate. "The House is a lot more fun, a little rambunctious, and the Senate is not as noisy ... you're one of thirty-one [in the Senate]. It really makes the relationships even more meaningful," she explained.<sup>21</sup>

During her time as a Texas representative, Alvarado partnered with Air Alliance Houston to reach out to concrete batch plants that disproportionately polluted African American and Latino neighborhoods in District I. She and Representative Armando Walle created a space for community members to participate in public hearings against these hazardous plants. Soon after being elected to the Texas Senate in 2018, Alvarado passed Senate Bill (SB) 900 to regulate above-ground storage tanks in response to the 2019 ITC fire in Deer Park. As a state senator, Alvarado felt she had to compromise on certain bipartisan issues, but she has remained a staunch supporter of women's health and reproductive rights. When it came to voting rights, she staged a fifteen-hour filibuster in 2021 to stop passage of SB 1, a law that restricted voting, disproportionately affecting voters of color and disabled voters. Although the filibuster failed, the issue garnered national news, spotlighting Texas voter inequalities.<sup>22</sup>

One of Alvarado's proudest legislative achievements was implementation of the Deputy Darren Almendarez Act that made stealing catalytic converters a state felony. This followed Almendarez's 2022 murder when he tried to stop men from stealing his catalytic converter.<sup>23</sup>

Carol Alvarado is now fighting school voucher implementation in Texas, which would direct money towards home or private schools and further reduce precarious public-school funding. Alvarado has witnessed how vouchers in other states drained funds from public schools, which she does not want to see happen in HISD as a dedicated Milby alumna. She also notes that to protect education for all, the issue requires the participation of everyone, not just parents.<sup>24</sup>

Senator Alvarado has advocated for marginalized communities based on her personal experience since childhood witnessing structural inequalities within her East End neighborhood. Today, she emphasizes the importance of staying involved in her community to remember what she is fighting for in the Senate. With her sister, Alvarado still cares for her ninety-six-year-old mother, and she still visits her childhood church to partake in Lent. "I think continuing to be deeply rooted in the community keeps me grounded ... I always tell everybody, just don't ever forget your roots. Once you do that, you lose yourself."<sup>25</sup>

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Maria Jimenez and Carol Alvarado's stories demonstrate the importance of pushing for political action and advocacy in the Latino community. With support from their parents, they pursued politics at a young age to address racial and ethnic disparities in their community and make a positive space for future generations. Addressing issues that disproportionately impact women and people of color requires recognizing the policies that shape social and political outcomes. These women took extraordinary measures to improve the lives of those in the East End, the city, the state, and beyond. Their efforts come from the heart. 🏡

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*The "Chicano Student Mural," painted by University of Houston MAYO members in 1973, represents the history and struggle of Mexican Americans and served as a unifying symbol for Mexican American students for decades. Originally in the Cougar Den, the restored mural and that space are part of the campus bookstore today.*

