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Mandate from My Father: The Life of Isabelle Tellez de Ogaz

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History

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Mandate from My Father: The Life of Isabelle Tellez de Ogaz

Isabelle Tellez de Ogaz and her father, Florencio, had always had a close bond. Tellez remembers that, “I was one of the few of the children that used to converse with him more [than the other children].”¹ One day in late 1951, she and her father shared a special moment. The conversation was pleasant, easy, and casual. Isabelle shared with her father the struggles and accomplishments of the recently created Albuquerque chapter of the American GI Forum (AGIF), an advocacy organization for Latino World War II veterans and their families. Mr. Ogaz listened attentively. He was familiar with the goals and activities of the group, as Isabelle had used the Ogaz home for meetings of the organization from time to time. Toward the end of their conversation, Isabelle relates, “My father said, ‘You know what? God gave you a good head and a good heart and I would like for you to help our people, they need help.’ I was already aware of the fact that Hispanics were being badly treated, but when you have your father… give you a mandate… that made an impression on me. I would have done anything my parents wanted me to do, so I took his words to heart.”² At the time of this conversation, Isabelle Ogaz was a young, unmarried professional living in Albuquerque, New Mexico. She was intelligent, attractive, self-assured and was imbued with a strong sense of social justice. Already a leader of various youth and women’s groups at the local parish, San Filipe de Neri Catholic Church, and aware of the current social and political issues through her work as a secretary to Lorenzo Chavez at the Stanley Miller Law Firm, she was poised to take on a dynamic role in working

¹ Isabelle Tellez de Ogaz, unpublished interview by the author, 13 March 2010. Isabelle Tellez de Ogaz’s given name was Isabel Ogaz. While attending St. Mary’s Catholic School, one of the nuns spelled her name Isabelle. Mrs. Tellez liked the revised spelling so much that she began using that spelling in signatures, documents, and correspondence. Since her parents chose not to give her a middle name when she married, she used her maiden name as her middle name, Isabelle Ogaz Tellez or Isabelle O. Tellez. Within the last ten years, she has reverted to the more traditional Spanish form of her name Isabelle Tellez de Ogaz. In this paper she will referred to as Isabelle Ogaz or Ogaz prior to her marriage, and Mrs. Tellez, Tellez, or by her entire name, Isabelle Tellez de Ogaz after her marriage to Louis Tellez in 1955.
² Ibid.
against the various civil rights issues faced by Latinos and Latinas in Albuquerque. She little realized then that the American GI Forum was to become the vehicle for a lifelong commitment to advancing social change throughout the Latino community in Albuquerque and the nation. Through over sixty years of civic activism, she has forged political alliances; negotiated gender, ethnic and class boundaries; and created spaces for Latinas/Latinos to assert their significant social and political agency. By exploring the life of Isabelle Tellez de Ogaz, this history attempts to carry out the imperative given by historian Emma Perez when she speaks of writing Chicanas into history and to uncover a story that has resided as a "liminal identity, partially seen yet unspoken" in the more traditional narrative of Chicano history. Herein is an effort to give voice to one woman’s journey in the hope that it illustrates how many women have effected change despite “being conceptualized as mere a backdrop to men’s social and political activities” in much of the current literature on Chicanas and the American G.I. Forum.

The end of World War II brought changes to America and Americans of all ethnic backgrounds. For Latinos in particular, this period was a time of political and social action. Many World War II veterans and women from the Latino community no longer chose accommodation and acceptance of the status quo. Latinos who fought and died beside Anglos on foreign soil determined that on American soil they were not going to be relegated to low pay, menial jobs, and substandard education. These men and women, educated and tempered by the experiences of the war and the Great Depression, sought to take their places in an America where

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3 Emma Perez, *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History*, (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1999), 7. Although Mrs. Tellez is referenced in several works, including Henry Ramos’ *The American GI Forum: In Pursuit of the Dream, 1948-1985*, most histories of the American GI Forum give only cursory treatment to women’s contributions. Of all of the texts written about the history of the American GI Forum, Ramos’ has attempted the most thorough treatment of women’s contributions and even his is five pages in a 200-page work. Carl Allsup’s 1982, full-length treatment detailing the history American GI Forum is largely silent on the efforts of women in the growth and development of the organization.

political, social and economic equality was a reality not merely a promise. In the state of New Mexico, the nexus of this movement was Albuquerque and the University of New Mexico. Under the GI Bill, many New Mexicans and other World War II veterans from surrounding states took advantage of the opportunity to gain higher education and promote their economic status. Among this group were a number of Latino and Latina undergraduate and graduate economics, education, engineering, and business students. They gravitated socially and intellectually toward white-collar workers and professionals in the Albuquerque area with similar social and political concerns. Faced with many common issues and challenges, these men and women became a small, close-knit group of friends and associates.

Isabelle Ogaz’s natural proclivity for honesty and forthrightness and an insatiable desire to help others led her to gravitate toward this group of like-minded young men and women from the university and Albuquerque’s professional community. The enthusiasm of the members and the values of patriotism, family, educational equality, religious faith, and non-violence shared by these young people drew Ogaz to the group. These men, their wives, girlfriends, and sisters had been denied employment based on discriminatory practices at the University placement office, as well as by businesses throughout New Mexico and the southwestern United States. Hoping to foster a coordinated effort to change their situation and that of all Latinos, they met frequently to socialize and discuss possible courses of action or alternative avenues to equity in employment. Isabelle’s knowledge of the law and connections to several legal and political leaders within the community made her a welcome and valuable member of the group.

A fortuitous set of circumstances arose that would provide a means for these men and women to address their own issues of discrimination and those of the larger Latino community in

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New Mexico and later throughout the nation. In 1951, a group of Texas migrant workers arrived in Albuquerque disheartened and disconsolate. Tellez de Ogaz explains their plight, “Two busloads of workers had been recruited from Texas to work on farms in California, but when they got there... very few were employed. They had no employment; no housing and no arrangements were made for them. A busload came back through Albuquerque, and because the migrants had connections with Dr. [Hector P.] Garcia, they called him. So, he came and we met at the Barelas Community Hall.” These dislocated migrants and their aborted attempt for employment became the catalyst for the expansion of the American GI Forum into New Mexico.

While in Albuquerque dealing with the migrant worker crisis, Garcia met with the members of Ogaz’s group from the Albuquerque area and listened to their concerns. One of the members of the group attending the University of New Mexico was Vicente Ximenez from Texas; his personal connection with Garcia was instrumental in the New Mexico American GI Forum. As Tellez de Ogaz explains, “The Doctor knew Vicente Ximenez in Albuquerque, because he was from Floresville, [Texas]. At the same time as the Doctor was dealing with the migrants, he asked these men to form a chapter of the American GI Forum. That was sort of the beginning of the Albuquerque chapter—the beginning of getting this group together and getting us to work under the name of the American GI Forum. So, Albuquerque became the first chapter outside of the state of Texas [to have a chapter of the American GI Forum].”

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6 Tellez de Ogaz, 8 June 2010. The Barelas Community Hall, located a short distance from downtown, was a common meeting place for the members of the future AGIF Albuquerque chapter, which they could access freely. The building was large enough for the migrants and their benefactors to meet with Garcia. Dr. Hector P. Garcia gained national recognition for his role helping Private Felix Longoria gain a final resting place in Arlington National Cemetery amidst an incident of discrimination in the town of Three Rivers, Texas. It was this event, The Felix Longoria Affair, and other instances of discrimination against Latino veterans in Texas that prompted Garcia to organize the American GI Forum in 1949 as an advocacy group against discriminatory practices in local, state, and national governmental agencies.

7 Ibid. It is telling that Tellez also diminishes the participation of the women in her recollection. Although women were present throughout this initial meeting with Garcia, Tellez notes that Garcia addresses the men specifically. Although the scope of this paper is too short to cover the politics of gender in detail, it is indicative of gender politics of the 1950s to give women a subordinate role to men in civic organizations. Even as important as Tellez
Tellez de Ogaz’s first encounter with Dr. Hector P. Garcia, the founder of the American GI Forum, was memorable. “He came and he introduced himself to the people and asked about their situation. When I saw how he dealt with these people, the way he talked to them, the way he asked them what had happened, [about] their original agreement, and what they were going to do, and then how he could help them. He showed to be such a man of understanding and compassion, and yet, his speech was just beautiful; he was just eloquent. I remember being very impressed with him and that was the first time that I met him.”8 It was this first meeting with the charismatic and passionate Garcia that convinced Ogaz that his cause to help Latino veterans and their families would become her cause as well. Tellez immediately developed an enduring friendship with and admiration of Garcia that is evident when she speaks of Garcia today.9

During the initial organizational phase of creating the first New Mexico chapter, members planned dances, dinners, and social events to encourage membership.10 Among the charter members were Isabelle Ogaz, Louis Tellez, Victor and Benita Gonzales, James Baca, Eugene R. Hill, Baltazar Martinez, Gaspar Martinez, Cordelia “Cordie” and Pete Hernandez, and Vicente Ximenez. Later the membership included Procopio and Erma Martinez, Alfonso and Josephine Prue, Antonio and Mary Nunez, and Tony and Pearl Torres. After founding the Albuquerque chapter, these members worked through their friends, family, and professional contacts in other communities to create chapters across the state. They stressed the need for Latinos to have a voice and an organization to combat discrimination, to fight for educational

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8 Ibid.
9 Tellez de Ogaz, 14 March 2010. Even when speaking of Garcia today, Mrs. Tellez fondly calls him, “The Doctor.”
equality, to ensure fair labor practices, and to insist upon equal justice under the law.\textsuperscript{11} Even though a large segment of the organization’s membership came from World War II veterans, the Forum garnered a substantial portion of its membership from working class Latinos who felt the brunt of unfair educational and labor practices. In one of its first efforts, the New Mexico Forum publicly supported the 1951 Silver City Empire Zinc Mining Strike. GI Forum members collected money and held fundraisers to help meet the immediate needs of the strikers and their families.\textsuperscript{12}

Not satisfied with a passive or merely supportive role in fighting for civil liberties, Tellez de Ogaz spoke before the Albuquerque City Council in support of the 1951 “Public Accommodation Bill” on behalf of the New Mexico GI Forum. With this public demonstration, Tellez was one of the first Latinas to speak out against discrimination in schools and public facilities. She saw discrimination in public facilities and education as one of the most glaring problems facing Latinos everywhere, but particularly in New Mexico. The bill, jointly sponsored by the American GI Forum of New Mexico and the NAACP, outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, or national origin in all public facilities and banned the display of signs such as “NO Mexicans or Dogs Allowed.”\textsuperscript{13} She was able to use the Stanley Miller Law Office’s typewriters, copy machine and postage meter, due to the largesse of Mr. Lorenzo Chavez, to create flyers and mailers to generate public support for the bill. This bill passed in the Albuquerque City Council in February 1952 and was brought to a vote on the May ballot. The bill passed by a large margin and encouraged the passage of a similar bill in the New Mexico legislature in 1957. Almost from its inception, the AGIF was working toward social justice for all people of color in New Mexico.

\textsuperscript{11} Ramos, 19. The American GI Forum (AGIF) was originally a mixed gender organization, although men retained leadership roles until the Women’s auxiliary, later GI Forum Women, formed their own subordinate group.

\textsuperscript{12} Tellez de Ogaz interview, 13 March 2010.

\textsuperscript{13} “City Passes Measure Barring Discrimination: Referendum Expected,” \textit{Albuquerque Journal}, February 13, 1952.
Between 1954 and 1957, Garcia and the leaders of the state organizations created a national constitution and within the organization formed the GI Forum Women’s auxiliary, later renamed GI Forum Women, and the GI Forum Youth auxiliary. The purpose of the reorganization, according to Tellez, was not to separate, but to divide and conquer in order to accomplish more for the Latino community. “As the GI Forum Women, we had our own officers, our own projects, and our own constitution, but nothing [we did] could conflict with the goals and aims of the main organization. The women operated differently; that is why we needed our own by-laws.” The women undertook the fundraising, membership drives, leadership training, voter registration drives, and community outreach. Under its reorganization, The American GI Forum hoped to embody, not only its dedication to the needs of Latino World War II veterans, but also its commitment to Latino families. The new subheading on the national stationary now read, “The American GI Forum: A Veterans Family Organization.” The reorganization of the AGIF reflected the social mores of the 1950s and the ethnic inclinations of Latino culture. Women, although important (even essential) as wives and mothers, were subordinate to their husbands and fathers. As a result, the organization’s separation of the women into their own political structure within the larger group brought them more autonomy, not necessarily a subordinate position within the organization. Historian Cynthia Orosco notes of women’s auxiliaries in Latino organizations, “Women’s activism in all of its facets must be respected...Ladies auxiliaries were a female defined entity that simply did not meet the needs of men...Moreover, women’s politics were different from men’s, tending to include more beneficent politics.” The GI Forum Women’s politics were indeed different, but they also

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14 Tellez de Ogaz interview, 12 March 2010.
15 New letterhead is noted in Garcia’s letter to Vicente Jimenez, May 16, 1957, in the Dr. Hector P. Garcia Papers, Mary and Jeff Bell Library, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi.
worked with the men to accomplish mutual goals. Many of the accomplishments of the American GI Forum were due to the efforts of the women. Tellez explains, “The women were the backbone of the organization. The Doctor always said if he wanted something to get done, he put the women in charge. He said he could always count on the women.”

In 1960, Tellez took the reins of the National GI Forum Women. In her capacity as chairperson, she oversaw the creation of one of the most enduring legacies of the organization, GI Forum Education Foundation. Tellez recognized the need to provide financial assistance for Latino children who had the academic ability and desire to attend college but lacked the resources. Her vision created the GI Forum Education Foundation, and she later restructured it into the non-profit National Hispanic Education Foundation. She continues to serve on the board of the National Hispanic Education Foundation today. As of 2009, the Foundation has given $725,766 in scholarships to students across the nation from combined chapter and corporate donations. During her tenure as president of the GI Forum Women, she also oversaw the creation of the first treasury for AGIF National Women by creating and managing fundraisers at the national level. The purpose of this office was to allow women to have funds for activities that they chose to sponsor as opposed to having to requisition money from the men’s group. One of the highlights of her term as Women’s AGIF National Chairwoman was to preside at one full session of the National Convention in 1962. This was traditionally a responsibility of the National Commander, but Tellez received the duty for one of the sessions as recognition for her contributions to the national organization. She was the only Women’s AGIF National Chairperson to have that honor.

17 Tellez de Ogaz interview, 13 March 2010.
18 “GI Forum Women Calendar, Isabelle Tellez,” in the Dr. Hector P. Garcia Papers, Mary and Jeff Bell Library, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi.
19 Ibid.
From the 1960s through the 1990s, Mrs. Tellez devoted herself to improving educational opportunities in for Latino youth in the Albuquerque Public Schools and continued her service in various capacities within the local and state AGIF organizations. She organized and developed a musical instrument bank for Albuquerque public school children who wanted to play in the music programs but could not afford instruments. She created and managed the Curriculum Counseling and Financial Aid Project of New Mexico that provided services to predominantly Latino students. The program successfully reduced absenteeism, improved grades, and provided family counseling. Upon the students’ successful completion of the two-year program, they earned tuition for their first year of college. Through Mrs. Tellez efforts, the program received grants for five years from Intel Corporation as the sole sponsor of the program. Her dedication and management of the Counseling and Financial Aid Project resulted in 98% of students in the program going on to higher education. The program became the model for the Partnership for Community Action program currently implemented in the Albuquerque Public Schools.20 In recognition of her effort on behalf of the Latino community, she received numerous awards including the 1992 New Mexico Commission of the Status of Women Governor Award and 2002 Human Rights Board Special Award. She also served as a member of the New Mexico delegation to the International Woman’s Year National Conference in 1977.

Throughout her sixty-five years of activism, Mrs. Tellez worked to improve the lives of all people—men and women, rich and poor. She did not make these changes alone, but she was a driving force behind pushing many of the changes through. Her ability to find the right people, make the right phone call, and contact the right reporter made the difference between passing legislation, promoting local initiatives, sustaining a boycott—or not. As a leader, she pursued action more than accolades, progress more than publicity, and equality more than ego. Tellez

20 Tellez de Ogaz, 9 June 2010
was able to negotiate the politics of gender by meeting men on her own terms and not allowing conventions of traditional gender roles to stop her from doing what she felt was right for her and for her work with the GI Forum. She worked before she married, and she continued to work after marriage—partly out of economic need, but partly for personal fulfillment. She did not abandon convention; rather she but effectively managed her duties as wife and mother in order to continue her work outside of the home and her role as an activist. Even within the organizations of which she was a member, she often had to navigate the turbulent waters of gender, class and power. Tellez worked within the world of men where men set the agenda and made the rules; even when working with women class conflict and power struggles often played a part. To make these complex relationships succeed, she compromised when necessary but made a solid argument for her position always. The mandate that her father gave her almost sixty years ago remained a guiding force in her life. That casual yet significant conversation propelled her to feats that helped Latinos reach educational equality and helped to end discriminatory practices in hiring and public facilities. She took risks that she never imagined and achieved results beyond her wildest dreams. Tellez de Ogaz mused, “You know, I guess I must be a very daring person. I have done so many things and I never realized how far my actions would go.”

The mandate she embraced all of those years ago burns strong even today as she continues her leadership role in the Hispanic Educational Foundation and makes her considerable presence known as a revered member of the New Mexico and National American GI Forum organizations.

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21 Tellez de Ogaz, 13 March 2010.
22 Mr. and Mrs. Tellez were co-chairs of the 54th Annual American GI Forum National Convention held in Albuquerque in July 2011. The couple was recognized for their many years of dedicated service to the AGIF. Even at 87, Mrs. Tellez remains active and involved at both the national and local levels of American GI Forum.
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