

ANTONIA PANTOJA

b. September 13, 1922

d. May 24, 2002

EDUCATOR AND ACTIVIST

“Somehow I learned that I belonged with my people and that I had a responsibility to contribute to them.”

She worked tirelessly to reform the education system in New York City, making it more accessible to immigrants.

Dr. Antonia Pantoja was an educator and activist dedicated to the improvement of Latino communities through education. Born in San Juan, Puerto Rico, Pantoja spent much of her life living and working in New York City. In 1957, after receiving her master's degree from Columbia University, she founded the Puerto Rican Forum (originally called the Hispanic American Youth Association, or HAYA), which helped promote economic equality.

A few years later, Pantoja founded ASPIRA to promote education in the Hispanic community. The organization now operates in eight states and Puerto Rico and serves more than 85,000 students a year. In 1972 ASPIRA filed a successful federal lawsuit demanding that New York City teach transitional Spanish to struggling Latino students. The case represents a landmark in bilingual education in the United States.

During her career as an educator, Pantoja worked tirelessly to reform the education system in New York City, making it more accessible to immigrants. By 1970 she established Universidad Boricua, now known as Boricua College, with three campuses in New York City. She also helped to create the Graduate School of Community Development at San

Diego University. She received the Hispanic Heritage Award from the Hispanic Heritage Foundation and the Lifetime Achievement Award from the New York State Board of Regents.

When President Bill Clinton presented Pantoja with the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1996, she became the first Puerto Rican woman to receive the honor.

In 2002 she came out publicly in her autobiography, “Memoir of a Visionary: Antonia Pantoja.” She died the same year and is survived by her her longtime partner, Dr. Wilhelmina Perry.

In 2012 Pantoja was inducted into the Legacy Walk, a public display in Chicago that honors LGBT people. She is the subject of “Antonia Pantoja: ¡Presente!,” a documentary film produced and directed by Lillian Jiménez.

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