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HUFF POST **LATINO VOICES**

Cecilia Preciado Burciaga, Presente!

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In the spring of 1986 I dropped out of graduate school at the University of Illinois at Chicago, packed up my belongings, and drove 2,400 miles to East Palo Alto so that my then-wife could enroll in graduate school at Stanford University. I had already fulfilled my one dream in life at that time, which was to teach a section of freshman English. Why I wanted to do such I thing I do not know, but I did it, and I was happy. No one else in my family had ever been to college, per se.... Well, my father did live in the locker room at the University of New Mexico during one semester of classes before opting for the army. Then he married, started a family, and continued his education while working full time.

That first night in East Palo Alto, as I slept on the floor avant le moving van, the earth shook ... but it did not swallow me. So the next morning I hit the streets, looking for work. I quickly found the one job I truly despise, even though I have returned to it again and again. I became the cut-in man on a paint crew. For those of you who don't know, the cut-in man is the FNG who is handed a three-inch brush and directed to paint all the corners and trim, making things a breeze for the person who rolls out the rest of the wall or ceiling. I had worked in heat treatment factories, restaurant kitchens, parking garages, and even a public relations firm, all settings that demand rapid movement and a tolerance for temperatures that can top 100 degrees. But if Satan has a special corner of Hell for some sinners, no doubt there is an FNG crouched down beside the baseboard, cutting in before they arrive. That was me. And I was the worse cut-in man in the world.

By fall I found myself re-evaluating my future. I wasn't sure what prospects the university offered -- I mean, I had already taught, and once that's done, what else is there to do in academia? Nevertheless, I trekked to the central administration building at Stanford University, seeking some guidance. I still believed in the kindness of authorities. I found myself sitting across from an imposing figure -- you know, the type who can throw you into profound doubt about the most basic aspects of your very existence by raising an eyebrow. I had just met Cecilia Preciado Burciaga. She held many titles at Stanford: assistant to the president and advisor on Chicano affairs, associate dean of graduate studies, senior associate provost and associate dean and development officer for student affairs. She was the highest-ranking Latino administrator on campus. But the titles and rank hardly explain her forceful and hands-on commitment to increasing the number of Chicanos in graduate education. Without her unflinching belief in my rather ill-defined abilities, without her down-in-the-trenches sense of strategy, I would not have been accepted into a Ph.D. program at Stanford University for the following year. She made things real for me. She pointed to goals beyond my too-easily-realized dream of teaching freshman English.

But Cecilia also pointed to the magical. "You should meet my husband," she said, "he's an artist." What I remember now is something I did not appreciate back then: I spent a lot of time in Tony's studio at Casa Zapata, the Chicano-themed dormitory, where he and Cecilia were the resident fellows. Tony was multi-talented, finding success as a muralist, graphic artist, humorist, and founding member of the comedy group Culture Clash; he was also the author of numerous books of poetry, essays, and dichos. I also spent time with Cecilia in her office. She made things happen, and she offered perspective. Cecilia and Tony were role models on many levels, not least as a couple committed to -- and living -- gender equality. They were, as Tony liked to say, a mixed marriage: Tony was from Texas, un tejano, and Cecilia ... well, she was from California.... If they could work it out, there was hope for the rest of us. Back then being a Chicano graduate student at Stanford was not easy, especially insofar as we negotiated between our commitment to social equity for our community and the upward mobility a place like Stanford helped us secure as individuals.

By 1989 I was seriously prepared to drop out and return to being a cut-in man full time -- my graduate stipend had never allowed me to give it up altogether. It was at this point that I met Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, who showed me a different model for participating in academia, and Roberto Trujillo, who paid me a whopping ten dollars an hour to follow that model as an archival assistant for the Mexican American Collection at Stanford's library. By 1991 I was a Ph.D. and had landed my first job at the University of New Mexico. Looking back 22 years later as a full professor at a major research university, the story of what it means for me to have earned a Ph.D. from Stanford necessarily starts with Cecilia and Tony Burciaga. It is the people, and not the institution, that make a difference.

Cecilia, born in Pomona in 1945 to Mexican immigrants, passed away on Monday, March 25, after a seven-month battle with lung cancer. Tony had passed away in 1996. Both their children are teachers. Artist and educator Amalia Mesa-Bains, who once worked closely with Cecilia, puts her impact in historical [context](#): "She was a person of leadership in the Latino community long before it became fashionable. If things were unjust, unfair, not right, Cecilia would take up the cause and she wouldn't back down until the problem was fixed. I would consider her one of the people who most embodied the movement toward justice."

They say that no good deed goes unpunished. That is the price of a commitment to social change. In 1994 Stanford provost Condoleezza Rice laid off Cecilia and closed the crucial position she had occupied for two decades. In 1995 Cecilia became a founding dean for student affairs at the new California State University campus in Monterey Bay. In 2002 the university settled a lawsuit over racial discrimination brought by Cecilia and two other Latino staff members. The settlement included establishing a \$1.5 million scholarship fund for low-income students from California's Central Coast.

Cecilia was there when I walked into her office seeking guidance, and she firmly and kindly directed me toward a lifelong calling years before I knew it was mine. I was not alone in receiving this kind of help from her; I was one among hundreds. Today those of us who were mentored by Cecilia carry on her legacy in seeking educational access for all students. To use Tony's words in *Spilling the Beans: Lotería Chicana* (Joshua Odell Editions, 1995, page 101), we are her chameleons: "As we move from one world to the other we exchange colors, ideas, symbols and words in order to fit, to relate and to survive. The result is a prismatic iridescence when the difference of colors play on each other, like a rainbow after a rainstorm in the desert. We are chameleons." Cecilia Preciado Burciaga, Presente!

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