

The Legacy of Latina Activist Cecilia Burciaga

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Making my way south on Highway 68, I tried to compose my nerves.

The twists and turns that connect the 68 to Highway 1 toward Carmel Highlands in Northern California made me uneasy. The winding road was dark and the vast ocean made me grip the steering wheel just a little tighter.

Driving this road for the first time remind me of two things. One, I would be starting my first job as a Spanish reporter for El Sol in Salinas and two, I was to meet Cecilia Burciaga.

Before leaving my yearlong internship at Hispanic Link, its publisher and founder Charlie Ericksen had arranged a brief stay at the Burciaga residence — a temporary fix while I looked for my own place.

Uncomfortable with the nature of requesting a stranger to host me for two weeks, I mustered the courage and knocked on the door. Burciaga greeted my father, uncle and I with a stern face but comforting warmth. Like seeing a tía after a prolonged absence, she took away my fears and let me feel right at home.

Little did I know that two-years later I would be in the company of hundreds of others who regard the Burciaga legacy with respect and affection — the kind of love offered to extended family.

Even when I left her home, she reminded me, “If things don’t pan out in your apartment search, you can always return. This home will always be open.”

Latina activist Cecilia Burciaga

Cecilia passed away March 25, after a seven-month battle with cancer. She was 67-years-old. Her death ushered in support from many who knew Cecilia and her late husband Jose Antonio “Tony” Burciaga as two pivotal figures that helped bring Hispanic issues to the forefront.

Conscious of her limited time, Cecilia welcomed me to her home in Menlo Park, Calif. last month. There, she spoke about her legacy and that of her husband.

“On Caringbridge.org people can write notes to me. And I understand there are more than 400 to 500 notes. If you do a very quick scan there will be themes that come up,” Cecilia said.

“People are writing about how grateful they were to Tony and me for being mentors and an inspiration... Their notes have been very heart-warming. It reinforces that whatever you do to help others comes back to you, many times over.”

Cecilia, a former CSU Monterey Bay administrator, was nationally revered as a champion for civil rights and higher education. She spoke not of legacy but of the compromises she and her husband had to make when it came to social activism and raising a family.

Her husband was an accomplished Chicano artist, poet and writer. He died of cancer in October 1996.

Born in the small Southern California farming community of Chino to immigrant Mexican parents, Cecilia grew up in a time a time when U.S. popularized machismo by offering shows such as “Ozzie and Harriet” and “Father Knows Best” where the

head of the household went off to work in a three-piece polyester suit and the mother stayed home with a beautiful apron and heels to bake cookies, Cecilia said she confronted a changing dynamic of traditional values and female empowerment. “Then, there was a cultural issue,” Burciaga added. “You know, the Mexican woman was expected to act a certain way.”

Despite these “currents” Burciaga said that when it came time for marriage, she didn’t feel entrapped as other women of her generation often feared.

“Now that it’s all said and done, I don’t feel like I sacrificed career or my own trajectory. At the time when you are negotiating as a young couple that is trail blazing between the old husband and wife and the new husband and wife, we were really redefining a lot of things — sharing a lot of responsibilities in the house,” Burciaga said.

Part of blazing that trail meant changing the elitist perception of Stanford and acculturating young Latinos to their own history.

“[Leland] Stanford promised this university to poor children of California, so that no rich man would want his children here. From the institution’s inception, women were included,” both Cecilia and Antonio, wrote on April of 1991.

While living at Casa Zapata — a Chicano-themed dormitory — in the early 90s, Cecilia was an associate dean in student resources. At the time, students of color made up 44 percent of the student body. Hispanics represented less than 10 percent.

Determined to make Stanford more diverse, the Burciagas changed the culture of the school. Cecilia did so through administrative channels, while Tony offered ethnic awareness through arts.

“Tony lived for the arts,” recalled Julie Tilsner, a former staff writer for Palo Alto Weekly.

In 1992, Tilsner profiled the Burciagas while they lived in Casa Zapata.

Not long after they moved to the dorms, Tony drew attention from the press and community with “The Spirit of Hoover,” a student mural he directed.

It was the first of several he would produce at Casa Zapata and the most notorious of the 19 murals put there by various artists over the years.

The Burciagas’ efforts to push ethnic awareness made them a constant target. Once victims of vandalism, Antonio took to his creative streak and wrote a message to the vandals — “You are gutless and cowardly... protected by the darkness of the night and your own ignorance.”

Yet, the Burciagas’ determination to step into uncharted territory also made them favorites.

“Over the four years I spent at Stanford – three in residence at Zapata – I came to know Tony and his wife Cecilia pretty well. We students took ourselves very seriously. We fought over such things as what it meant to be Mexican, what it meant to be American, what it meant to be Chicano,” wrote former Stanford student Delia Ibarra in 1996.

Even when Stanford provost Condoleezza Rice eliminated Cecilia’s position as the highest-ranking Latino administrator at the university in 1994, students showed support staging hunger strikes calling for her reinstatement.

Cecilia helped in the hiring of Rice to Stanford.

Looking back at those memories, Cecilia said that while she wished things had turned out differently, she was at peace with her legacy.

“I think that my husband’s legacy lives on. When you write books, they stay behind and they keep talking for you.

“The best legacy I can point to now is my own two children and grandchildren.”

I’m thankful for Cecilia’s daughter Rebecca who opened her doors to us last moth. I will also forever be thankful to Cecilia and her son “Toño” for opening the their doors to me.

Far more impressive than the gorgeous ocean view I enjoyed every morning was Cecilia’s kindness, a kindness that came through not in words but deeds.