



THREE VIEWS of community leader Juanita Sanchez, who left a legacy of working to make a better life for local Hispanics.

Reviving the spirit of Juanita Sanchez

On July 27, 1992, after an extremely busy day, Juanita Sanchez lay down on her living room couch to catch her breath. She stopped breathing a few minutes later.

It was her brother, Angel, who called me at home soon after to tell me she had been rushed to the hospital and the emergency room doctors were still trying to resuscitate her. By the time I arrived at Rhode Island Hospital, she was gone.

Juanita was born in the Dominican Republic in 1953 and came to the United States with her family in 1966. I remember her stories about growing up in Rhode Island,



MARTA V. MARTINEZ

stories of sadness, discrimination and loneliness as she struggled to become part of "the American system."

Soon after I moved to Rhode Island in the fall of 1988, I applied for a position as the project coordinator of a local Hispanic organization. In January, I received a phone

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FROM THE COVER



SANCHEZ AND HER SON, TONY, enjoy a rare moment of relaxation. Her parents' struggles with the immigrant experience inspired her to help others.

Juanita's impatience, compassion, inspired me

Continued from the cover

call from Juanita, who had just become the group's president, offering me the job.

Her voice sounded so small. As it turned out, Juanita was 5 feet 5. Little did I know when I met her how truly "big" she was.

From that day on, she set off to teach me some things that to this day I have not forgotten. They inspire me in most everything I do.

The first thing she taught me was that the term "Hispanic" did not necessarily have the same meaning in Rhode Island as it did when I was growing up in Southwest Texas. To me, "Hispanic" meant Mexican: Mexican food, Mexican music, Mexican holidays, Mexican customs, and even speaking Mexican Spanish. Juanita pointed out that Rhode Island's Hispanic Community is a rainbow of ethnic cultures and that the word "Hispanic" does an injustice to this ethnically diverse group of people who only happen to share a language and a few food items.

I decided I would read all I could find and study about this young community so that I could truly begin to feel a part of this new family. When I found very little to read, Juanita and I decided we would begin researching and documenting the rich history of Hispanics in Rhode Island. I am still working on this project, and continue to learn something every day.

From Juanita, I also learned impatience, perseverance and compassion.

MARTA V. MARTINEZ

pick her up to take her to the next meeting she had promised to attend. Whether she had to be in Pawtucket, Newport or South County, she always managed to get there by public transportation — and on time, too!

And when I needed her to be somewhere to support me or help our organization, she never said "No." I learned from her the importance of commitment to other people and organizations.

She always felt it was her duty to speak up on behalf of the Hispanic community. Traditionally, Hispanics are underrepresented when it comes to making policy decisions and having political power, and Juanita taught me the importance of showing that we do have a voice, and that we should speak up, speak out and persevere as much as possible.

Ignored her own health

Persevering was what Juanita did best. She never seemed to tire. She would go to bed late, rise early and run all day, every day. The hardest lesson I learned from her after her death was that I also had to balance my life and slow down once in a while.

I do believe she died because she was too busy taking care of other people's needs and failed to take care of her own health.

In the last year before she died, Juanita began to look pale and ill

...to learn something about
 From Juanita, I also learned
 patience, perserverance and
 mpassion.

Explosive personality

Juanita was one of the most
 mpassionate people I ever met.
 er sometimes explosive
 ersonality was only on the
 xterior, while inside she cared
 ough for the people who came to
 er for help that she would be on
 he phone until the wee hours
 rying to help a youth who had
 een kicked out of his house by his
 arents; calling around looking for
 oney for someone whose gas or
 lectricity had been shut off;
 assisting politician friends in
 getting out the vote; or counseling
 a young girl about an unplanned
 pregnancy.

People also came to her house to
 talk to her about her problems. She
 never seemed to tire of helping
 others. All this, I believe, came
 from her childhood experiences as
 she watched her parents struggle to
 provide for their children while
 they learned American customs,
 fought off discrimination and never
 quite mastered the English
 language.

Juanita was impatient with
 people who would give up without
 first making an effort to help
 themselves or with those who
 made judgments without offering
 to help. I, too, learned to be
*impatient with city and state
 officials who refused to listen; with
 bigoted individuals who took
 advantage of immigrants; and
 especially with Hispanics who
 refused to fight stereotypes and try
 to make a better life for
 themselves.*

Juanita inspired me when I saw
 her waiting on corners for a bus to

people's needs and failed to take
 care of her own health.

In the last year before she died,
 Juanita began to look pale and ill.
 Only then did she decide to visit
 her doctor. Many of her friends
 suspected she was more ill than she
 let on, but her energy level fooled
 us all because she never slowed
 down.

In June of 1992, I noticed she
 had become very philosophical and
 pensive. She talked about wanting
 to see people she had not seen in a
 long time, and we had long,
 thoughtful conversations about life
 and her future. She still had so
 many things she wanted to do, she
 told me.

And then suddenly, about a
 week before her death, she became
 restless, and she did not stop
 moving until the moment she died.

Uniting people of color

Somehow, people felt that with
 her perserverance and tenacity she
 united the Hispanic community and
 brought together other
 communities of color. When she
 died, hundreds of people came
 together to mourn and to honor
 her. People she had somehow
 touched deeply in her short life.

I thought a lot about her soon
 after she died. Her spirit kept me
 moving and I was determined to
 keep working with her same goals
 in mind. But, lately I have felt that
 she is slipping from my thoughts.

It has been three years since her
 passing, and I wonder whether
 others are having trouble
 remembering, too. While a building
 in South Providence now bears her
 name (a Hispanic community
 center she often dreamed about), a
 scholarship has been awarded to
 high school students in her name
 and the Juanita Sanchez
 Community Fund was established
 in her honor, I feel that she has
 now become just that — a name.

I don't want her spirit to be
 forgotten, because I believe she
 inspired many others who have
 never come forward to say so.
 Teenage mothers whom she
 worked with in her daily job;
 students at many of the local
 colleges whom she inspired to
 become role models; and her
 family, who did not realize until
 after her death what a strong-
 willed and "big" person she had
 become.

Juanita was not as perfect as
 many people want to remember
 her. I believe she was a human
 being who was ahead of her time,
 with visions and dreams that are
 now slowly becoming realities.

The next time I visit her
 gravesite, I think now I can again
 remember Juanita as a strong and
 compassionate human being — not
 just a name on a tombstone,
 gathering dust and cobwebs that
 fly away when the wind blows.

Marta V. Martinez lives in
 Warwick.

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 PG13 12:15 2:20 7:20 9:45 R 12:45 2:45 7:30 9:50

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