

“Amazing Grace”

A TRIBUTE TO GRACIELA OLIVAREZ
BY JIMMY GURULÉ

The Hispanic Law Students Association presented its 2006 Graciela Olivarez award to Prof. Jimmy Gurulé in honor of his service both to their members and to the greater Hispanic community. The text that follows is Prof. Gurulé’s acceptance speech.

“Ave Maria llena de gracias.” “Hail Mary full of grace.” How fitting that the first female law graduate of Our Lady’s Law School was named “Graciela” or “Grace.” She was affectionately known to her friends and colleagues as “Amazing Grace,” and her life was truly amazing. Graciela was a woman of enormous strength, courage, dignity, and passion. While she mixed gracefully with the powerful leaders of our country, including congressmen, senators, governors, and even university presidents, including our own Rev. Theodore Hesburgh, CSC, she was most at home serving and advocating for the poor, homeless and underprivileged. After all, that was Graciela’s mission in life.



While Graciela is recognized as the first female law graduate of Notre Dame Law School, this accomplishment only begins to scratch the surface of the “amazing” life of this “amazing” woman, who was “graced” by God. Graciela was born in the segregated mining town of Sonora, Arizona, during the Great Depression. Her father was a machinist who worked in the copper mines for 35 years and had emigrated to the United States from Spain. Her mother, a Mexican-American, gave piano lessons to help support Graciela and her four siblings. When Graciela was 15 years old she was forced to drop out of high school to find a job. After her parents split up, Graciela moved to Phoenix, where she grew up in a world where certain forms of legal discrimination were practiced. Speaking about racial discrimination in Phoenix, Graciela told a *Washington Post* reporter that “[t]here the public pools were closed to blacks and Mexicans and both groups had to sit in the movie theater balconies.”

At age 20, Graciela began working at a radio station, where she worked as a secretary, engineer, and announcer. Eventually, she became the host of an “action line” program, where she was an instant hit with the Chicano audience. The radio program opened her eyes to the complexities of racial discrimination and caused her to become involved in civil rights work.

Later Graciela was appointed to head the Arizona branch of the federal government’s Office of Economic Opportunity (“OEO”), where she was responsible for coordinating the state delivery of services from all federally funded social welfare programs. It was during this time, in approximately 1966, that she met Father Theodore Hesburgh, who had been appointed as the Director of the US Civil Rights Commission. Graciela told Father Hesburgh of her frustration and lack of effectiveness working for the Arizona Office of Economic Opportunity. Impressed with her intelligence, compassion, and service to the poor, Father Hesburgh proposed that she enter law school, even though she lacked a high school diploma.

In 1967, with her seven-year-old son Victor, born from a previous marriage, Graciela moved from Phoenix, Arizona to the Midwest to study law at Notre Dame Law School. She was 39 years old. It is difficult to imagine how she must have felt on the first day of class. Graciela was a brown woman, a divorced and single parent, studying in an environment dominated by white males. At 39 years of age, she was approximately 17 years older than the students who had enrolled in law school immediately after earning their undergraduate degree. To further aggravate the situation, Graciela had received her last formal education when she was 15 years old, before she dropped out of high school.

Certainly Graciela was the only woman of color, and probably the only student of color, in the entire Law School. In the 1960s, few

women and even fewer persons of color studied to become a lawyer. More than likely, all of Graciela's professors were white, and all were male. What courage and determination it must have taken for Graciela to remain at Notre Dame and earn her law degree. In 1970, Graciela persevered and became the first woman graduate of Notre Dame Law School. The story of "Amazing Grace," however, doesn't end there.

After graduation from Law School, Graciela returned to Phoenix, where she worked as a consultant to the National Urban Coalition, and then as the Director of Food for All, where she managed and administered a half-million-dollar OEO-funded program designed to improve federal food programs such as school lunch, food stamps, and surplus food distribution in Arizona. She took the first paycheck from her \$22,000-a-year salary and used it to make a down payment on her "dream car," a three-quarter-ton Ford pickup truck.

In 1972, Graciela moved to New Mexico, where she became the Director of the Institute for Social Research and Development at the University of New Mexico. She also was a Professor of Law at the University of New Mexico Law School in Albuquerque. In 1975, Graciela's talents were recognized by New Mexico Governor Jerry Apodaca, who appointed her as the Secretary of the New Mexico State Planning Office, where she served as the highest-ranking woman government official in New Mexico and perhaps the entire Southwest. As the Secretary of State Planning, Graciela and her staff were responsible for reviewing long-range and short-range planning for all New Mexico state agencies.

By this time, Graciela's reputation as a civil rights leader had grown to national status. Graciela and Vilma Martinez, another Latina civil rights pioneer, were the first women to serve on the Board of Directors of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund ("MALDEF"), the premier Hispanic civil rights organization. Graciela later became the chair of the MALDEF. In 1972, Graciela led a campaign to require equal representation of men and women on the National Council of La Raza Board of Directors.

Graciela was a person of deep moral conviction. Her strong Catholic upbringing caused her to be a staunch opponent of abortion. In 1975, the National Women's Political Caucus rescinded a speaking invitation they had extended to her because of her anti-abortion views.

In April 1975, Graciela was named by *Redbook* magazine as one of "44 Women Who Could Save America." In the article, it was suggested that she would make an ideal Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare. President Jimmy Carter must have been a subscriber to *Redbook* magazine. In 1977, he appointed Graciela to serve as the Director of the Community Services Administration ("CSA"), the federal government's anti-poverty agency. Graciela was unanimously confirmed by the Senate, becoming the highest-ranking Hispanic and the third highest-ranking woman in the Carter administration. Her work with CSA earned her the title as "Washington's Top Advocate for the Poor." When she was appointed to her new position, one reporter commented that "[o]nce again Olivarez finds herself involved in the world of the poor—but this time as a viceroy of the government's social engineering."

After serving three years, Graciela resigned her CSA post and returned to her beloved New Mexico. In 1980, she started Olivarez Television Company, Inc., the only Spanish-language television network in the country. She continued her work in broadcasting and philanthropy until her death in 1987. On September 19, 1987, "Amazing Grace" died of cancer in Albuquerque, New Mexico. "Her untimely death . . . left a legacy of hope for thousands of women."

While Graciela's awards and honors are too numerous to mention them all, several should be highlighted. Graciela received an Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters degree from Amherst College (June 1973) and an Honorary Doctor of Law degree from Michigan State University (December 1975). She was also appointed to the National Advisory Council on Economic Opportunity by President Lyndon Johnson, and appointed by President Nixon to the Commission on Population Growth and the American Future, where she served as vice-chair of the Commission. She served on the National Board of the ACLU, the Board of the Fund for the Improvement of Post-secondary Education (Health, Education, and Welfare Department), the Commission on Education for Health Administration, Commission on Private Philanthropy and Public Needs, American Bar Association's Commission on Correctional Facilities and Services, and received the National Award from the American Cancer Society for cancer prevention work among Mexican-American women.

Graciela also generously volunteered her time to aid the poor and physically and mentally disabled. She volunteered as a mentor to high-risk teens, recorded education lessons in Spanish for the blind, worked with the Maricopa Council for Retarded Children, directed Spanish plays at the Phoenix Little Theater to promote Mexican-Spanish heritage, organized entertainment (shows, dances, skits) for patients at the State Mental Hospital, Veterans Hospital, and State Tuberculosis Sanitarium, in addition to performing her cancer prevention work with Mexican-American families.

Finally, as I reflect on Graciela's inspiring life, I wonder: if she applied to the Law School today would she have been admitted? As an academy, we have become so fixated on national rankings and academic indicators that she might have been rejected based on her LSAT score. That would have been a shame and a tragic loss for Notre Dame. Fortunately, Father Hesburgh perceived something special in Graciela and knew that if given the opportunity to earn a law degree, she would accomplish great things. Father Hesburgh was right.

Notre Dame Law School is committed to educating "a different kind of lawyer." Graciela gives true meaning to that term. The Law School and the legal profession desperately need more people like Graciela, more persons of color, more advocates for the poor and disadvantaged, and more champions of civil rights and social justice.

Graciela truly was an "amazing" person, "graced" by God, and today we honor her memory and legacy.