

Rebecca Jaramillo (Becky)

Advocate for Equal Rights
1939-2005

By José Faus

Rebecca Jaramillo (Becky) was born Rebecca Dolores Hernandez on October 23, 1939. She was the fifth of 12 children born to Daniel Hernandez and Francisca Yanez, both born in the state of Guanajuato, Mexico.

Rebecca experienced racism at a young age, and she spoke about it in her Panel of American Women speech. "Mexico is a part of North America, and this is where my grandfather was born. Yet, somehow we continue to be regarded as aliens, foreigners. I became painfully aware of this when my third grade teacher called me to the front of the class and instructed me to describe life in Mexico. I was dumbstruck and embarrassed because I'd never been to Mexico and wanted so much to be thought of as one of the class/group. I was 8 years old and devastated by her assumption that I had been born in another land/country."

At the age of 17, Rebecca headed to Kansas City, Missouri to attend Rockhurst University and work in the Dean's office. On a visit to Topeka, Kansas, June 1957, she met her future husband Joe Jaramillo. They married on January 28, 1961, while Joe was on a two-week leave from the U.S. Army.

Joe and Rebecca experienced discrimination in their new home and mobilized to combat it. They joined the NAACP and joined Kansas City's People for Public Accommodations drive which sought the passage of a bill requiring public businesses to provide service to all persons regardless of race, national or ethnic origin, skin color, etc. They succeeded in registering scores of people in time to vote on the issue. The bill was passed by a thin margin and became law in 1964.

Jaramillo's advocacy was broad in scope. She served on boards of local and national community agencies such as Model Cities; the U.S. Office of Economic Opportunity; the American G.I. Forum, the League of United Latin American Women; the Panel of American Women; the Incorporated Mexican American Government



Employees (IMAGE), 1979 to 1982 as national chairwoman of the IMAGE Women's Action Committee with headquarters in Washington, DC; the Federally Employed Women; the United Nations Women's Commission; the Women's Political Caucus; the Guadalupe Centers, Inc.; the Mexican American Women's National Association (MANA); the Heart of American United Way; and the Salvation Army.

In 1981 Central Exchange of Kansas City named her Woman of the Year. Guadalupe Centers awarded her the I. Pat Rios Award for outstanding contributions to the community in 2002, citing her role in the completion of Posada del Sol and the first Westside neighborhood fountain. On March 4, 2005, Jaramillo received the YWCA Hearts of Gold Award for Economic Empowerment for her service 30 years earlier as a United Nations delegate on a commission studying the status of women in the world.

While serving as national secretary for the Panel of American Women, Becky was part of a select group of panelists invited to the White House on April 27, 1979, for a special reception hosted by President Jimmy Carter in their honor for their many years of work in the area of human relations.

Jaramillo also received distinguished awards from the Federal Executive Board of Greater Kansas City, the U.S. Department of Defense, the Panel of American Women, the Mexican American Women's National Association, and the Salvation Army.

In 1981, Jaramillo together with her fellow HUD employee José Gonzalez and Ninfa Garza, program coordinator for the Guadalupe Center's Senior Citizens program, founded the Greater Kansas City Hispanic Heritage Committee and its Fiesta Hispana to commemorate National Hispanic Heritage Month.

Jaramillo's favorite fiesta moment came out of tragedy when a severe earthquake struck Mexico City in 1985. "When we got news of the human suffering in Mexico, we immediately started collecting relief funds from the fiesta stage. People contributed very generously, and all the fiesta's entertainers donated their pay into the fund, as well. It was very heartwarming to see such compassion and generosity toward the quake victims," recalled Jaramillo

Becky Jaramillo died May 13, 2005, after a courageous 15-year battle with cancer.

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