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Helen Ubinas
Trinity College

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**The Life and Times of Maria Clemencia Colon Sanchez:
Hartford's Puerto Rican Community's Matriarch, 1926-1989**

Helen Ubinas

A Work in Progress Submitted as a Final Project
For "History of Hartford" course at Trinity College

Introduction

Maria Clemencia Colon Sanchez had an eighth-grade education. She spoke broken English, had often debilitating diabetes and had no political background. Yet she was able to transcend everything that should have kept her from succeeding to not only become a leader of Hartford's Puerto Rican community, but also of Hartford politics. And she did all of this from a small Albany Avenue newsstand that served more as a social service agency than a place of business.

Sanchez first became involved in the community at Sacred Heart Church on Ely Street. She and a group of equally vocal women fought to get a Spanish-speaking priest for the neighborhood church, which was serving hundreds of Puerto Rican parishioners yet holding Mass in the basement with an English-speaking priest.

Sanchez also helped organize just about every Puerto Rican organization in Hartford, including the Puerto Rican Parade Committee and La Casa de Puerto Rico. The parade is still held every year, and La Casa de Puerto Rico remains one of the most reputable and respected community organizations in Hartford.

Sanchez fought for bilingual education, and for Puerto Rican representation in every arena, including Hartford churches, schools, city government and city jobs. Among the results of the causes she backed, and often led, was the establishment of the Ann Street Bilingual School in 1972, nicknamed La Escuelita, and the hiring of Hispanic teachers, police officers and firefighters.

Sanchez led with courage and determination when many others wouldn't or were not yet prepared. But always, her focus and hopes were on the younger generation, many

of whom she helped form into leaders that still serve Hartford today as council members, teachers, police officers and state senators.

In 1973, Sanchez was the first Puerto Rican elected to the Hartford school board. She held that position for 16 years, most of those as its secretary. When there was an abundance of Spanish-speaking students, but a lack of Spanish-speaking teachers, she helped recruit teachers from Puerto Rico.

In 1988, Maria became the first Puerto Rican woman to be elected to the Connecticut General Assembly. She did not want to leave the school board, but she could not pass up an opportunity that would propel her community, and its needs, forward. She served until her death on November 25, 1989.

By the time Sanchez died, she was considered the matriarch of Hartford's Puerto Rican community, a madrina, a godmother to people who owed much of their success to her passionate and unwavering loyalty to the underprivileged and underrepresented in Hartford.

The community is still battling many issues - many they battled when Sanchez was still alive - but Sanchez' activism laid the groundwork for Puerto Rican's to gain more power and representation in Hartford. The stage has long been set for the new generation of Puerto Rican leaders to continue her fight- in Sanchez' name, and in her honor.

The Life and Times of Maria Clemencia Colon Sanchez

When Maria Clemencia Colon Sanchez came to Hartford in 1954, she said she would only return to Puerto Rico in a box. Hartford was her new home, and she would not live, like so many before and after her, with one foot on the island, and another on the mainland.

Sanchez came to Hartford for many of the same reasons immigrants from other countries had, and many of the same reasons that later moved Puerto Ricans to migrate to the city: Opportunity. Better jobs. Better educations. A better life.

But like every newcomer to this city, Sanchez also had personal reasons for coming. When she was in junior high school, Sanchez left school to help raise her youngest brother, Jose Colon. Sanchez grew up one of six children— she was a twin. The family grew up in Comerio, Puerto Rico, a small town in the mountains at the center of the island. The family lived in a small house in the barrio of Comerio. By the time the youngest was born, two of her brothers were already in the Army. But caring for the family was still a struggle. Both parents had to work in order to feed the family. Sanchez' mother had little choice but to ask her daughter to leave school to help raise her brother.

Sanchez' mother and father were farm workers who toiled in the fields for hours each day. When farm work in the barrio slowed down, the family moved to the city, where they not only continued to work cattle and tobacco fields, but also worked in factories. Still, there was not always enough money. Siblings who went away to the military would often send money, as would Sanchez when she later moved to Hartford.

Sanchez' mother was the matriarch of the family, a strong, stubborn woman who ruled her home. Her father was a quiet, hardworking man who was also an alcoholic who would go into town on Fridays to do groceries and drink a couple of 5 cent beers before returning home for a week of labor in someone else's farm. Neither parent could read or write. Sanchez' mother did not learn how to sign her name until she was 40-years-old.

“She had to sign papers and she didn't know how, and she was sick and tired of putting an X or having someone go with her places so that they could sign for her, so she decided she would go back to school to learn to sign her name.” (Jose Colon, brother)

Both parents tried to teach their children the importance of education, but family obligations sometimes kept them from reconciling their desire to have their children go to school and the need to care for the family. Sanchez' mother eventually died of stomach cancer; her father of the drink.

Sanchez did as she was asked and left school to help raise her brother while her parents worked. But in the process, she lost touch with her school friends and in many ways the life she had before she became a surrogate mother and homemaker for her brothers and sisters. When her brother was six, she tried returning to school, but felt lost. Her friends had all graduated. She was much older than the other students. Sanchez' childhood had been replaced with motherhood, and now Sanchez could not find her way back to adolescence.

She decided to pursue a dream she had been harboring for some time: She would become a nun. She had always been very involved in the church. She organized different

church groups, and conducted First Communion classes. Becoming a nun would allow her to be part of the one place where she still felt comfortable.

“The church, I think, was the first place where she saw how much she liked to help people. It was always a gift that she had. She started with me.” (Jose Colon, brother)

But her mother refused to let Sanchez join the church. Sanchez could return to school, but becoming a nun was out of the question. She wanted Sanchez to have a family, children of her own, and a life that exceeded the church. Upset by her mother’s decision, Sanchez was unsure of what to do next. Soon, however, she decided to join an aunt in Hartford. If she could not have her old life back, or start a new one in Puerto Rico, she would start over in a new city. Hartford would be her new home, and Sanchez would never look back.

When she first arrived, she did what so many before her had; she worked in a tobacco field. It’s unclear how long or in what town she worked in, but as was typical of her leadership skills, family members remember her being a crew leader on the farm. She went on to work at a meatpacking factory in New Britain, where she would work for 14 years before owning her own candy/newsstand at 246 Albany Avenue in Hartford.

On rare visits to Puerto Rico, Sanchez would talk about life in Hartford. She would tell friends and family about the difficulty of finding an apartment, a job. Equality. She was having a hard time finding an affordable, safe apartment in Hartford. She would apply for jobs, and never get a call back. Her inability to speak English was another obstacle. Despite those difficulties, however, Sanchez would send whatever money she

could afford home so that her brother and sister could go to college, and so that her mother wouldn't have to work as hard in the fields or factories. Life in the fields had taken a toll on her mother's health.

Sanchez' experience was one many Puerto Ricans in Hartford were struggling with. In 1954, the Hartford Courant quoted a piece from the New York Confidential. The piece referred to Puerto Ricans as "crude farmers subject to congenital tropical diseases. They are almost impossible to assimilate. ... They turn to guile and wile and the steel blade, the traditional heritage of a sugar cane cutter." Until 1950, the Puerto Rican population in Connecticut was only 1500. By 1954, it had grown to approximately 12,000. Between 1951 and 1957, Puerto Rican's in Hartford were numbered at 3,000. In 1959, the Courant estimated the number at 6,000. (Robert E. Pawlowski, "La Casa/Su Gente: The Development of Hartford's Puerto Rican Community," A Publication of La Casa de Puerto Rico, Inc.)

Many Puerto Ricans left Connecticut, **frustrated** and disgusted at how difficult it was to overcome prejudice in a land that had offered so much opportunity for those before them. Some professionals returned to the island after realizing that their education and status in Puerto Rico often barely translated into a blue-collar job in Hartford, let alone the middle-class existence they desired. Still others would stay for a while, returning to Puerto Rico as soon or as often as they could. Sanchez, however, was determined to make a life in Hartford. Her discussions about the difficulty Puerto Ricans were having in Hartford were not so much complaints, as they were a call to action to herself and others around her.

“She would say, ‘Yes, it’s like this now, but we can change it.’” (Jose Colon, brother)

Even in the early days, when Puerto Ricans were still a tiny minority in Hartford, Sanchez talked about the need for Puerto Ricans in Hartford to organize and claim a position in their new home. And in many ways, her early hardships, and many others throughout her life, helped develop Sanchez’ already innate sense of involvement and activism.

One of the most formative of Sanchez’ hardships was her abusive marriage and the loss of her baby. Sanchez met her husband shortly after arriving in Hartford. They met at a family gathering in Hartford, and married not long after. Sanchez’s husband was an abusive alcoholic, a man who reportedly hit her if he thought she had spent too much time at church or a community meeting. The abusive relationship surprised Sanchez, who was used to her father’s quiet way of drinking. Friends begged her to leave him, but she remained loyal. This was the man she had chosen to marry, she often told friends, and she would stick by him. She had loved him. Now, she felt sorry for him. And her maternal instincts would not allow her to abandon him.

Not long into the marriage, Sanchez became pregnant. The story of how she lost her baby varies, from her slipping in the snow to being beaten by her husband moments before she went into labor. Some said she gave birth to a baby girl that died days later. Everyone agreed that whatever occurred, she was unable to ever have children again. It remains a topic many are unwilling to discuss. Even in her death, the community that Sanchez served, protects her.

Despite the tragedy, Sanchez never divorced her husband, and kept his last name. As the marriage went on, he became a bum, living mostly on the streets from one drink to another. He went to jail often for disorderly conduct or loitering. Sanchez would bail him out, and when she couldn't, she would send money with a friend so that he could buy cigarettes in jail. During one of those stays, he reportedly hung himself in his jail cell. Sanchez paid for his funeral, and rarely, if ever, spoke of him, her marriage or her pregnancy again. She never remarried, but her love for children seemed to stem from the tragedy of losing her own. The community became the family she never had.

Community photographer Juan Fuentes took a picture of Sanchez that illustrates her commitment to the community and its children. In the photograph, Sanchez is at a community meeting, holding a baby in her arms. Her hands are clasped tightly, her eyes fixed on the child.

“Whenever I think of Maria, this is what I think of. She loved children. Children were her reason for doing so many of the things she did. I think she decided that if she wouldn't be able to have children, she would try to protect them, even if they weren't hers. (Juan Fuentes, photographer)

Even as she was going through personal difficulties, Sanchez did as she had in Puerto Rico and got involved with the church. In Hartford, her involvement began at the Sacred Heart Church on Ely Street. She organized several groups for the church. Among them, Society of Jesus, Daughters of Mary, Women of Our Lady of Providence, Legion of Mary and a church-sponsored Girl Scout Troop #107. It was at Sacred Heart where Sanchez also participated in one of the Hartford Puerto Rican community's first attempts

at gaining recognition as they fought to bring a Spanish-speaking priest to the church with a growing number of Puerto Rican parishioners.

“Father Joseph Otto didn’t expect this kind of reaction from the new parishioners who started to arrive at his Sacred Heart Church in 1956. This was a German Church. The new Puerto Rican group which had come to his parish after being moved from St. Peter’s and St. Patrick&t. Anthony should behave like guests, he thought. The newcomers had a different idea. At St. Peter’s their Mass was in the basement, their functions isolated from the larger congregation. The treatment was similar at St. Patrick/St. Anthony. An angry and determined group including Maria Sanchez, Olga Mele and Nilda Ortiz organized a petition to remove Father Otto. The Chancery conceded. In 1959, Father Andrew Cooney, a Spanish-speaking priest who had first been assigned to work with Hartford Puerto Rican Catholics four years earlier, became Sacred Heart’s new pastor. There were no more Masses in the basement.” (Robert E. Pawlowski, “La Casa, Su Gente: The Development of Hartford’s Puerto Rican Community,” A Publication of La Casa de Puerto Rico, Inc.)

The first visible Puerto Rican community in Hartford began to grow around the Clay Hill area, around the intersection of North Main Street and Albany Avenue. Sanchez lived in that neighborhood, on Williams Street, and bought a store right at the center of the Puerto Rican community on Albany Avenue. At the time, Sanchez was making minimal money at a meatpacking plant in New Britain. She had saved some money, but knew that she would never be able to get a loan for the store from a bank. So she and the previous owner – an African American - made a deal that allowed her to pay him little by little until she owned the store.

Sanchez's candy store, flanked between the Clay Hill Package Store and Botanica Yaemaya, became the point place for community and political activity. She never had to ask what the community's issues were. The store was her window to all of them. And those she didn't experience herself or witness from her store, came inside in the form of people looking for her help. Across the street was a bus stop where winos and gang members hung out. Further up that street was Quirk School. When school let out, the kids would come into her store to buy penny candy. Sanchez loved having the kids in her store. She often took the opportunity of having them in there to ask about school, and tell them about how important it was to finish their education. She also wasn't shy about disciplining those who were disrespectful with a simple warning, "I know your mother." And Sanchez did. By that time, there were very few people living in the community that Sanchez did not know-- a fact that was not lost on the politicians who flocked to her store. She was a classic ward heeler, solving the problems of her constituents, offering advice and counsel, interceding with the powers at City Hall. She was a link, a connection between the people and the politicians who purportedly served them, but barely knew them. Many have said Sanchez was "of the people." But she wasn't. Sanchez was the people. She lived in the same neighborhoods they lived in. She worked the same types of job. She went through the same hardships, the same prejudice, they did. She was a friend, a confidante, and a mother to them.

If a neighborhood drunk needed a cup of coffee or something to eat, they went to Sanchez' store; if a politician needed votes, they too knew to go to Sanchez. Before elections, Sanchez would hold voter-registration drives outside her store and register voters as a sworn special assistant registrar. On Election Day, she would call on anyone

she knew to go out and remind people to vote. No one around her could rest until they, and everyone they knew, would vote.

“She explained to me how to go and knock on doors, what the say to people. After she taught me how to work in the polls.” (Clorinda Soldevila, friend)

Veteran and wannabe politicians spent just as much time in her store as people from the neighborhood. Former Mayor George Athanson would spend hours at the store, joking with residents and reminding them that he was their mayor and that he was a friend of Sanchez. Others who spent time there included former state representative George Ritter, his son former House Speaker Thomas Ritter and former Deputy Mayor Nicholas Carbone. Deep, loyal relationships were formed in that store, between white, establishment-type politicians and a woman who still struggled with the language, but who wielded more power in her section of town than many politicians did in the whole city. They liked and respected Sanchez, but any white politician at the time knew that if they wanted the Puerto Rican vote, Sanchez was the only one would could get it for them.

“I remember two little girls taking me by the hand and bringing me to Maria. She asked me some questions about what I was going to do for the community, She liked what she heard, so she helped me.” (George Ritter, former state representative)

Despite her evolving role, politics never took priority over helping the people in her community. Sanchez was a “one-woman social service operation who helped a largely poor neighborhood handle housing, education and welfare problems, while

holding voter-registration drives on the side.” (Bill Keveney, Sanchez C. Sanchez Dies; City Puerto Rican Leader,” Hartford Courant, November 26, 1989.)

Around this time, Sanchez also was helping found dozens of organizations in Hartford, including The Puerto Rican Parade Committee, La Casa de Puerto Rico, the Society of Legal Services, the Spanish American Merchants Association, the Puerto Rican Businessmen Association and the Community Renewal Team. She also founded the Puerto Rican Coronation Ball, a special event to help raise funds for the church and for the Puerto Rican state parade, which she helped found in 1964.

Even early on, Sanchez had a way of making people follow her. She was a communicator who identified people’s strengths and made them realize how important it was for everyone in the community to get involved. No one seemed able to deny Sanchez’ or the passion in which she did things. If Sanchez wanted something done, she’d find a way to do it. She did not allow her lack of education to be an obstacle. If she did not know how to do something, she’d find someone she trusted who did. She was brilliant at identifying and motivating those who could, whether the day’s mission was to go to a Puerto Rican Day Parade meeting or to convince a legislator to back a cause that would elevate the Puerto Rican position in the city.

“She would say, ‘We need to go to a meeting of the Puerto Rican Parade.’ And then she would say, ‘Would you like to drive? She didn’t give you a choice in whether you’d be involved. If you were with Maria, you were involved.’” (Juan Fuentes, photographer)

“I don’t think she necessarily knew how to do things. She knew how to think about things. For example, she didn’t know anything about housing code. She had me learn about housing code. What she knew how to do was how to keep people engaged. When I was in trouble, I

would ask Maria for help. I would ask her to show up, and provide the passion that no one else could.” (Eddie Perez, friend and fellow activist)

By the middle to late 1960s, Maria was an active participant in Hartford politics. In 1966, she was treasurer of the Puerto Rican Democratic Club of Hartford and an active member of the Latin American Action Project. That same year, she also sought and attained a seat on the Hartford Democratic Committee. Her mission remained the same. In a statement that was dictated by Sanchez, but written by someone else, she said she wanted the position “so that our problems can be recognized. I am entering the political field with high hopes that the future of my people will contribute its share of responsibility and enrichment to this democratic government and this vibrant society.” (Jack Zaiman, “Politically Speaking: Puerto Rican Leader Seeks Democratic Committee Post,” *The Hartford Courant*, April 1, 1966)

Sanchez was a threat to the establishment almost immediately. She was handed, as the story goes, \$500 and a one-way ticket to Puerto Rico by a Democratic Town Committee chairman who feared that her power and ability to deliver the Latino vote would push out the white, male establishment. Sanchez, never one to hold her tongue when she was angry, told that chairman to shove the ticket and the money where the sun don't shine.

Sanchez' involvement in politics was never ego-driven. She did not have an overwhelming desire to become a politician. But she did have a commitment to gain representation, respect and opportunities for her community. She believed deeply that no one could understand the plight of her community, unless they were part of it. She was always leery of those who claimed to be part of it – even if they were Puerto Rican - until

they proved their commitment. And when there was no one else willing or able to participate, she stepped up.

“She never so much wanted to become a politician as much as she wanted representation We used to bump heads because I used to hate politicians. I used to tell her, ‘You’re going to find people who are going to hate you because as a politician, you have to be able to lie.’ And Maria didn’t know how to lie. So, Maria never was a politician. Maria used politics just to help people. She wasn’t the kind of person who would say, ‘Vote for me because I’m going to do this or that. She got elected because she need to be there to do things for others, so she would go and say, ‘If I get that position I could do this or I could see what’s going on and talk about it.’ So, she wasn’t there for Maria, she was there for the community. So, if there was going to be a law that would help someone, she would say, ‘Ok, let’s help this individual trying to pass this bill.’ But if it was something that was going to hurt us, she would go down to the street and tell everybody, ‘This is going to hurt us, let’s go against us.’ ” (Jose Colon, brother)

Each day, before dawn, she would walk to her store from her Williams Street apartment. By the time she got there there were already neighbors or neighborhood street people waiting for her. She would sit on a rickety old metal chair and hold court while people would come in looking for help. They couldn’t find an apartment, a job. One time, a mother came in to tell her that students were being told to carry their chairs from class to class because there weren’t enough seats for each classroom. Sanchez went to the school to straighten out the situation. The next day there were suddenly enough chairs in the school. No one could ever quite explain how Sanchez got things done; they just knew that if something needed fixing, she was the one to go to.

“The call had to come from Maria. It had to be explained in Maria’s way and the magic would happen.”
(Eddie Perez, friend and fellow activist)

Later, many would realize it wasn't so much magic that helped Sanchez as much as commitment. When she wasn't holding court at her store, she was going to meetings in the city and throughout the state. Often it would be after midnight before she realized she hadn't eaten anything, or had forgotten to take her diabetes medication. She had little time for anything else except her community, including taking care of herself. And she had little patience for things or people who took the focus away from the community and their needs. In a rare interview with the press, she said, "I don't like publicity. I don't like newspapers. I don't do things because I get paid or because I have been promised positions or titles. I do things because I like them. I work for a goal. I work so someone can benefit from what I accomplish." (The Hartford Courant, "An Institution Called Sanchez: Politician, Role Model, Refuge, January 15, 198 1)

"Not once did Maria ask anything for herself. She did everything but sleep in her store— actually sometimes when she was really tired, she'd doze off behind the counter."
(Ray Petty, first bilingual teacher in Hartford.)

Her commitment came at a cost, to her health and then later her reputation. If someone called and needed her help, or there was a meeting she had to attend, she left the store with whoever happened to be in it. Often, one of the street people that had become her friends. She trusted too many people too much. It was a practice that got her into trouble.

In 1977, Sanchez was charged with fraudulently issuing a check. She was arrested by state police who claimed she failed to turn over \$12,193 to the state gaming commission from her business as a licensed Daily Numbers game agent. A computer

terminal, from which the Daily Numbers tickets are punched and recorded, was removed from the store. At the time, Sanchez had served four years on the board of education, and was seeking reelection. She pleaded innocent to that charge. She produced a check for the missing amount. (William Cockerham, "Betting Theft Laid To Board Member," Hartford Courant, August 11, 1977)

Prosecutor Allen W. Smith substituted a charge of issuing a bad check for the two counts of first-degree larceny and one count of second degree larceny, said that his reasons for changing the charges, besides Sanchez' restitution, included his belief that she did not intend to steal money from the state. He blamed the receipt shortages on "bad business practices." Her case was transferred to the accelerated rehabilitation program monitored by the Adult Probation Department. (Bob LaMagdeleine, "Gaming Check Case Granted Transfer," March 24, 1978)

At the time, most people rallied behind Sanchez. Many said they knew that someone she had left in charge of the store had taken the money. Sanchez knew who it was, but never told anyone. The man had needed money for child support. She was more disappointed than angry. She would have given him the money, she told a few friends, if only he had asked. With the help of friends and family, Sanchez came up with the missing money.

"Sanchez would have rathered gone hungry, and there were many times she did, than take money that was not hers. Even when she did have a little money, if someone came in and said they were hungry, or that God forbid, their child was hungry, Sanchez would just hand them the money." (Clorinda Soldevila, friend)

There were those who at the time speculated that Sanchez was guilty. Her store didn't make her rich. She gave away more than she sold. She had two notebooks full of customers who owed her money, and never hesitated to add another name to it if someone needed food or diapers for their baby. But years after, when many would perhaps be more willing to talk if they thought she had stolen the money, they insist she was innocent. The incident, however, would be Sanchez' biggest professional and personal embarrassment, and not because she was seeking reelection to Hartford Board of Education. Despite the controversy, she was reelected for a fifth term.

Sanchez was first elected to the school board in 1973. She was the first Puerto Rican to be elected the Hartford School Board. She had run before, but was defeated by others with more connections to the establishment, or with more education. When others would list their accomplishments in the paper during elections, they included the college they attended. Sanchez included a long list of the organizations she helped form, the number of years she had made Hartford her home, her commitment to education and the people in her community.

The school board became her heart and soul, a way for her to help the children in her community and thereby ensuring a better future for Puerto Ricans in Hartford. She did not vote along party lines, as much as she voted in the best interest of her people, her children. Other school board members knew that to go to Sanchez with a deal was futile if it wouldn't benefit the community.

She fought to hire the first Puerto Rican school superintendent **Hernan LaFontaine**. But it was not an appointment she based solely on ethnicity.

“It wasn’t like she just wanted a Puerto Rican there. She wanted a person who would fight for education as hard as she did.” Hernan LaFontaine, former superintendent)

But her biggest and most lasting accomplishment was the establishment of bilingual education in Hartford. It was a program she supported before she became a board member, and one she fiercely protected after. The cause was helped by a Consent Decree, which was the culmination of efforts to develop a bilingual program in Hartford schools, which had begun in the early 1970s. Federal legislation enabling school systems to establish bilingual education had been in place since 1968. Locally, the cause was picked up by a core group of activists, including Sanchez. The result was the establishment of the Ann Street Bilingual School in 1972. Formerly St. Patrick/St. Anthony Catholic School, Ann Street Bilingual School established a pilot program which drew children from throughout the city. Hartford’s first group of strictly bilingual teachers, most of them recruited from Puerto Rico, was trained at Ann Street through a Teacher Corps Program. “The struggle for bilingual education was a difficult one. The Board of Education, a reflection of a Hartford which believed Puerto Ricans should “just learn English like the other immigrants did,” resisted. Puerto Ricans argued that the immigrant experience was not parallel.” (Robert E. Pawlowski, “La Casa/Su Gente: The Development of Hartford’s Puerto Rican Community,” A Publication of La Casa de Puerto Rico, Inc.)

But in addition to the causes Sanchez took up on the board, there were always others in the community. In 1969, she helped ease tensions among the Puerto Rican community, a motorcycle gang and the city. The gang did not want Puerto Ricans in their bar, which was in the neighborhood. Fights broke out. And when police were called to

the scene, the Puerto Ricans were targeted as the troublemakers. Sanchez was angry at how her community was treated, but as she so often did, she used the situation to demand more Puerto Rican police officers, more cultural awareness and sensitivity. Sanchez was also among hundreds of marchers after 12-year-old Julio Lozada was killed by the collapse of a roof of an abandoned garage behind her store in May 1979. The firefighters who showed up could not understand the Spanish-speaking children who tried to tell them that a boy was trapped inside; he died before anyone understood. Spanish speaking police officers and firefighters were hired shortly after. A park named after Julio Lozada was also erected.

Through her activism, Sanchez inspired many of today's Puerto Rican leaders, in many instances setting the way for the new group to take over where she and others like her left off. It was a role she took seriously and rarely left to chance.

“You would get a call and it would be Maria saying something like, ‘Ok, this is what’s going to happen. This is what you have to do.’ Even before you showed up, she had smoothed the way for you.” (Eugenio Caro, councilman)

But the relationship between teacher and students had problems. As the younger group that she had mentored grew older, many also grew impatient. They wanted a bigger role in Hartford politics, and not always necessarily with Sanchez’ blessing or on her schedule. Talk started circulating that many of the younger set thought it was time Sanchez moved over, and made room for the younger, more educated, Puerto Rican activist. Some said Sanchez was over her head. The community’s needs had gone beyond the basics to issues they thought were more complicated and better handled by them. Many also thought that someone representing the community should have an education.

By that time, Sanchez had received an associate's degree from the Greater Hartford Community College. But that did little to appease many of the younger, educated and ambitious set.

Later, the complaints became that she was too old and sick. Sanchez was falling asleep at meetings. Many blamed it on her age. But in fact, it was due to her diabetes. While they were respectful of Sanchez, it was becoming increasingly difficult for them to hide their ambitions. In 1979, Mildred Torres went up against Sanchez for a seat on the city council. The Puerto Rican Socialist Party put out flyers backing Mildred Torres for the vacancy and criticizing Sanchez as someone out for herself, not for the community. (The Hartford Courant, "Hispanic Students Supporting Sanchez," January 20, 1979.)

Sanchez wasn't so much angry as she was hurt and disappointed. She had never wanted to stand in the way of the younger Puerto Ricans who wanted to serve their community. However, she was in many ways an old-school politician who thought it best for the elders to have a say in who the next leaders should be. She wanted to help pave the way for them, make it easier than it had been for her. But she also wanted to make sure that their motives to run were not about ego, but about improving the community. And while she believed in Torres motives for running, she felt slighted.

While Sanchez never tried to get even, her power was evident. Many, including Torres, learned that lesson the hard way. At a council meeting, Mildred Torres was asked to translate for Spanish-speaking audience members. She refused, saying that she was a council member not a translator. The crowd, who assumed she was trying to distance herself from them, grew angry. The situation became heated, with Torres refusing to be treated as anything but a council member and the Spanish-speaking crowd becoming

more and more insulted. While still upset with Torres, Sanchez pulled the group outside and told them that they should not air their discontent with Torres in a public. Torres, she reminded them, was one of them and should not be disrespected. The community's name was at stake. Torres, she explained to them, was trying to make a point. Sanchez and Torres made up. But the issue of Sanchez being too old and undereducated to lead lingered.

Those who had aligned themselves with her in the past took advantage of the opportunity. Abraham L. Giles ousted Sanchez from the town committee in the spring of 1988. She got mad and she got even. She successfully challenged the veteran incumbent for the state House of Representatives – making her the first Puerto Rican woman to hold that position. His 6th district, representing the central and northeast section of Hartford, had gradually become more Latino than Black. Old or not, perhaps not as educated as others, Sanchez still had a hold on the Puerto Rican vote.

The new position was not one she coveted, as much as one she felt she needed to go after when Giles cut her out. She did not want to leave her post on the board. Still, when she won, she was elated. Not so much because she had acquired such a prestigious position, but because she had high hopes that it would heighten the community's political representation.

“She called me and said, ‘We won. We won,’ I think that was one of her proudest moments.” (Clorinda Soldevila, friend)

As she had on the board, Sanchez fought for the community as a state senator. But she was new and had a lot to learn. She rarely spoke during public meetings, and instead

chose to promote her community's causes as she had always done. She aligned herself with those she trusted understood her mission and would help her accomplish it.

“Her biggest impact was on that Board, and even more than that, on her streets. That's where she was the most effective, where she was happiest.” (Tom Ritter, fellow state representative)

Sanchez did not get to serve out her full term. A week after Thanksgiving in 1989, Sanchez died alone in her home. Friends who arrived that morning to a closed store knew something was wrong, so they went to her home on Williams Street. When she didn't answer the door, someone peeked inside a window and saw her sitting peacefully in a chair. Sanchez was dead at 63.

The night that she died, she called her brother to tell him that she was cold. He told her to put the heat up, but instead she asked him for her blessing. She died a couple of hours later. Her family did not request an autopsy. They knew that her schedule, her disregard for her own health, and her diabetes had finally killed her.

“She gave her life, her whole life to the city of Hartford.” (Jose Colon, brother)

Even before news of her death was official, hordes of neighbors and friends gathered outside Sanchez' apartment. Men, women and children cried and mourned the death of a woman they regarded as their mother, their protector. At the funeral in Hartford, hundreds gathered to remember a woman who despite being elected to positions no other Puerto Rican had held, remained of the people.

A picture that Juan Fuentes took at the funeral best describes the legacy that Sanchez left behind. In the picture, a well-known, white, male politician stands beside an elderly poor Puerto Rican woman, both paying respects to a woman that affected both of their lives deeply.

The funeral took place at Sacred Heart Church on Winthrop Street, the small neighborhood church which was the basis for Sanchez's first community involvement and organization. The bilingual funeral mass began with the singing of the "Star-Spangled Banner" and the Puerto Rican national anthem, "La Borinquena." A group of Puerto Rican teenagers stood behind her casket and sang in Spanish as a stream of Sanchez's colleagues from the state legislature, Hartford's Democratic Party and the Hartford school board walked by the open casket. (Andrea Estepa, "Political Leaders, Hispanic Residents Mourn Sanchez," Hartford Courant, November 29, 1989)

A special election to fill the vacancy was held. Giles sought his old seat. But so did Sanchez's protegee, Edna Negron. The Hartford Courant wrote that the "candidate would have to establish in six weeks the recognition Sanchez had earned in more than three decades of service." Negron wanted desperately to continue Sanchez's work, but there were moments she thought she wouldn't be able to succeed. But the community that had lost their matriarch supported Negron. Negron worked out of an upstairs room at DeLeon's Funeral Home during part of her campaign, the funeral home that prepared Sanchez's body for her funeral. She went into the neighborhoods that she had grown up in, and that so loved Sanchez. And when she was uncertain if her hard work and her good will would get her elected, she talked to Sanchez. One day, after an especially grueling day of campaigning, she asked Sanchez for a sign if she was on the right track. Her

husband, Jack Cullin, laughed at her request. But moments later, the streetlights on the road they were traveling on went out. Negron was elected, and finished out Sanchez's term.

Sanchez was buried near her mother and father in Comerio, after a similarly large funeral in Puerto Rico attended by family and politicians from Connecticut and Puerto Rico. In September 1991, the Sanchez C. Sanchez Elementary School on Babcock Street was dedicated. And in October 1993, Sanchez was commemorated along with other distinguished Hartford citizens in the Hartford Public Library's Plaza of Fame. Each year, an award is given to a person who exemplifies what Sanchez stood for. Past recipients include Carmen Rodriguez, executive director of La Casa de Puerto Rico; Ray Gonzalez of Guakia Inc. This years recipients included Negron and Edwin Vargas, one of the teachers Sanchez recruited from Puerto Rico. Sanchez was also named to the state Women Hall of Fame.

Conclusion

Maria Clemencia Colon Sanchez once told a group of white, male legislators that one day Hartford would have Hispanic doctors, lawyers and every single professional that was then predominately represented by white men. They practically laughed at her. Beyond political representation, what Sanchez wanted more than anything was for children to have a better life, to have a better shot at education. To succeed beyond anyone's expectations – or lack of.

Sanchez' dream, in large part, came true. Today, Puerto Ricans do make up every profession in Hartford and beyond. Many of Hartford's Puerto Rican children go on to college. Many serve the community. There are two Puerto Ricans on the city council. A Puerto Rican man leads the Hartford's teacher's union. There are Puerto Rican teachers, principals, and police officers. Hispanics are now the largest minority in the city.

But there is still work to be done. In many ways, many of the same fights are being fought. The equal and quality education she wanted so much for her community still, to a large degree, does not exist. Politically, Latinos are still underrepresented. As one close friend of Maria's told said, "The community, the causes, have gone backwards since Maria's death."

Ironically, many point to Maria's success as the downfall of Puerto Rican power here in Hartford. She was successful, many say, at teaching the younger Latinos about the importance of education, and ensuring that they could acquire that education, that they educated themselves right out of the city, thereby leaving a void of quality, educated leadership that is necessary now. These younger leaders, critics say, are more loyal to

downtown and the suburbs than the neighborhoods that their parents grew up in, or that they grew up in.

But others are more optimistic, insisting that beyond the younger leaders that learned at Sanchez' feet is another group of educated, Puerto Rican activists preparing to move the community, its causes and needs, into a new millemnum.

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