

Mirta Ramirez

Founder of Aspira of Illinois

A Woman of Action



Mirta Ramirez (B.A.'72 University Without Walls) is a woman who personifies the phrase "Actions speak louder than words." At 78, she is credited with a lifetime of social action in Chicago's Spanish-speaking community. Her efforts have been so far-reaching that they continue to have an impact more than 30 years after their enactment. One of her most sweeping accomplishments involved her work as the founder of the Illinois chapter of ASPIRA, a nonprofit organization devoted to the education and leadership development of Puerto Rican and other Latino youth. Her involvement with

ASPIRA began in the mid-'60s, a time of social turmoil throughout the country. Ramirez, who was married with two small children and attending Northeastern, was already a known social activist. Among other initiatives, she was credited with starting one of the first academic tutoring programs for K-8 Spanish-speaking children.

During the summer of '66, an incident with the police precipitated a violent uprising in the WestTown-Humboldt Park area, where many Puerto Ricans lived. Realizing that something needed to be done, the Latin American Boys Club leadership enlisted Ramirez and other activists to help organize a march on City Hall and survey Puerto Rican families about their most pressing problems. Their efforts gave rise to the formation of committees to tackle problems in housing, social services and Ramirez's main concern - education. One day while studying at Northeastern, Ramirez came across a book about Puerto Ricans in New York. The book discussed efforts to address community problems, including the work of ASPIRA, then a fledgling organization, founded by noted Puerto Rican activist Dr. Antonia Pantoja. Ramirez decided to go New York to investigate.

In New York, Ramirez met with ASPIRA's executive director, Luis Nunez. She told Nunez that ASPIRA should have a national presence, since Puerto Ricans in other urban areas also needed help. Although Nunez agreed, it took several months to convince ASPIRA's Board of Directors who were skeptical about taking such a big step and concerned about imposing on other cities' leadership.

Once they were convinced, Ramirez began recruiting other community organizers, including NEIU professor emeritus Samuel Betances, to join her in developing a formal plan to establish a Chicago branch of ASPIRA. The plan became part of an ASPIRA expansion grant funded by the Ford Foundation.

That was over 30 years ago. Today, ASPIRA has a national office in Washington D.C. as well as branch offices in Chicago, Puerto Rico, New York, and several other Eastern Seaboard locations. Their work has grown from running a few high school clubs in New York to the creation of research centers, alternative schools and clubs in high schools throughout the country.

Ramirez has also gone on to accomplish much more. She formed a coalition of community groups who negotiated with the Chicago Board of Education. She initiated establishment of the first bilingual classroom in Chicago and the first teacher training program for bilingual teacher aides. She helped secure funds for creation of a Puerto Rican-based art school at the Ruiz Belvis Cultural Center.

"One of my professors at Northeastern once told me, 'Mirta, YOU are an initiator.' I never really thought much about it at the time," said Ramirez. "But sometimes, now, when I hear people describing my accomplishments, I think maybe that professor was right."

Ramirez received the 2006 NEIU Distinguished Alumna Award at the May Commencement.