

Dra. Antonia Pantoja

Lesbian Puerto Rican Educator and Activist

(1922-2002)



"You cannot live a lukewarm life...you have to live a life with passion."

– Dra. Antonia Pantoja

Antonia Pantoja overcame the poverty and circumstances of her childhood to become a schoolteacher who focused on the educational needs of disadvantaged children. She emigrated from Puerto Rico to the U.S. mainland in 1944 and soon began to organize her community around principles of self-determination and pride in their shared heritage. In 1953 she co-founded the Hispanic American Youth Association, which later became the Puerto Rican Association for Community Affairs (PRACA); and, in 1957, founded the National Puerto Rican Forum, an incubator for organizations and programs promoting economic self-sufficiency. In 1961, Pantoja founded ASPIRA, a non-profit organization that continues to provide counseling, financial aid and other assistance to Latino students and their families through a network of charter schools and affiliated programs nationwide. Today many of her “Aspirantes” have become dynamic leaders in their communities as well as successful entrepreneurs, political figures and entertainers. Dra. Pantoja worked with the Ford Foundation, the National Urban Coalition, the National Association of Social Workers and the Council on Social Work Education. As one of the most important Puerto Rican community leaders in the United States, she was presented with the Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor, by President Bill Clinton in 1996. In her autobiography, *Memoir of a Visionary: Antonia Pantoja* (2002), she revealed that she was lesbian – sparking controversy among some in the Puerto Rican community who would have preferred her orientation had remained a secret and those in the GLBT community who resented that she had not gone public with the revelation sooner. She weathered such criticisms with the patience, strength, and wisdom that remain the hallmarks of her legacy, declaring “I am at peace with who I am.” Dra. Pantoja succumbed to cancer in 2002, survived by her partner of nearly 30 years, Dr. Wihelmina Perry.



Lesson Plan

Level 1: Contributions Approach

1. Activate prior experience: What other role models do you know that have overcome poverty or family circumstances to become a teacher, who made a difference in the lives of disadvantaged children?
2. Read the biographical information.
3. Group Discussion: How did Dr. Pantoja assist her own Latino community?
4. Extend knowledge: View this video clip <http://www.wmm.com/advscripts/wmmvideo.aspx?pid=94> and describe the beliefs that Pantoja has for youth.

Level 2: Additive Approach

1. Review the symbols for Presidential Medal of Freedom at <http://www.ifklibrary.org/Research/Ready-Reference/JFK-Miscellaneous-Information/Presidential-Medal-of-Freedom.aspx>
2. What were the contributions that led Dr. Pantoja to earn the Medal of Freedom? Click on <http://www.drantoniapantojafellowship.org/apps/photos/photo?photoid=58764409>
3. Choose an inductee from the Legacy Project who could be nominated for the Medal of Freedom.

Level 3: Transformational Approach

1. Read the section on Dr. Pantoja <http://www.redalyc.org/src/inicio/ArtPdfRed.jsp?iCve=37719112>
2. Why do you think Dr. Pantoja was silent about her sexuality?
3. Dr. Pantoja states, “You cannot live a lukewarm life . . .you have to live a life with passion.” Do you think it’s fair for the GLBT community and Latino community to be critical about revealing herself as a lesbian?

Level 4: Social Action Approach

1. What were the beliefs and personal values that Dr. Pantoja possessed to make a difference in society?
2. Read “Valuing Our Children” by Dr. Pantoja’s partner, Dr. Wihelmina Perry at <http://acrossthebridge.wordpress.com/2012/04/16/valuing-our-children/>
3. Develop your action plan that would support youth today.