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.

"You cannot live a lukewarm life...you have to live a life with passion."
– Dra. Antonia Pantoja